

Donald Rodney (1961-1998)

In the House of My Father

Key facts:

- **Date:** 1996-7
- **Size:** 1220 × 1530 mm
- **Materials:** Photograph (one of three) taken by Andra Nelki, C-print on paper, mounted on aluminium
- **Location:** Tate
- **Nationality:** British
- **Scope of work for Pearson A Level:** Identities



1. ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Subject Matter

In the House of My Father is a close-up photographic image of Donald Rodney's left hand, in which sits a minute sculpture of a house made from his own skin constructed with dressmakers' pins and measuring 2 x 2 x 3cm. The structure exists as an independent autobiographical work.¹ At one level the work is a form of commemorative self-portrait directly linked to family history (note the title). Rodney was diagnosed as a baby with the hereditary disease sickle cell anaemia - which resulted in persistent chronic pain and frequent hospitalization. It relates directly to his own body and his own mortality - he died the year after this work was made. Rodney also used sickle-cell anaemia to explicitly explore the black body. As such it became a metaphor - a 'signifier of blackness' (Eddie Chambers) in relation to racial stereotypes. His experience of the physical disease is also used as a metaphor for contemporary British society diseased by racism, poverty and inequality.

His decision to make a house might relate to the aspiration of many immigrant families to lay down new roots and own a house, to provide a home as a place of security. It might also relate to the tradition of patriarchy which expect fathers to hand down a legacy to their sons. Yet this house is dilapidated. Michael Harris wrote that this '*prototype for a vernacular two-storey house...easily sits in the palm of the artist's hand...It is a touching, ambiguous work that returns us both to the scholastic hierarchies of medieval scale, where small is infinite, and the more modern sense of small as confinement. Sitting in the artist's hand it seems as though he could crush it in an act of definitive relegation.*'²

Whilst the artist, curator and friend of Rodney's - Eddie Chambers (born 1960) - has observed that '*the house, a delicate, simple dwelling seemed to symbolise the fragility*

¹ *My Mother, My Father, My Sister, My Brother*, 1997, skin, pins, tape, 2x3x2cm (unframed) - The Estate of Donald G Rodney.

² Michael Norris 'Para-Cities and Paradigms' in *Art Monthly*, No. 224, March 2001, p.13

and the near-futility of Rodney having to live within a structure hopelessly unable to sustain itself or withstand even the smallest turbulence.’³

Formal Qualities

The photograph is taken from the position of someone looking down from a close viewpoint on the open curvilinear hand resting on the white sheets of a hospital bed. The sharp focus on the hand reveals the pores and creases on the palm and fingers that identify an individual. Indeed, the palm is open as if for a reading of his future and the inside wrist, where one’s pulse is taken, is revealed before the cropping of the frame. In the centre is the rectilinear house with a drier skin texture. Even on a large scale the tiny house is imbued with poignancy. The muted colours and soft lighting suggest melancholy as much as ‘blackness’. Rodney’s partner Diane Symons interviewed Nelki, - the photographer, who described the protective hand as having both ‘intimacy and vulnerability’, even when enlarged.

2. CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

In the House of My Father was made for his 1997 exhibition ‘Nine Night Eldorado’, at the South London Gallery, which Rodney dedicated to his father who had died in 1995. At the time of his father’s death Rodney was also in hospital and unable to be at his father’s bedside. He spoke about the personal anguish this caused him. ‘Nine Night’ signifies the vigil, traditional in Jamaica, that takes place when someone dies. The family meets to eat, drink and reminisce over a period of nine nights, often playing cards while talking. ‘Eldorado’ refers not just to the mythical city but to his father’s favourite film from 1966, directed by Howard Hawks and starring John Wayne and Robert Mitchum. The city of gold being equivalent to the ‘land of milk and honey’ that Rodney’s father expected to find in Britain when he arrived from Jamaica in the 1950s. Rodney was not able to attend the opening of the show as he had just had his hip removed as part of his treatment for sickle-cell anaemia.

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) with which he was diagnosed when a baby. This 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 in relation to racial stereotypes and black masculinity. The lack of research funding for sickle-cell anaemia within the NHS⁴ was also a pertinent and political issue in Britain, especially by the late 1980s with the AIDS/HIV crisis.

The title of the work ‘In the House of My Father’ has biblical overtones. It is a reference to St. John’s Gospel: *‘In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places. If there were not, would I have told you that I am going to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be.’* (John 14.1-6). Read out of context this might seem to relate to heaven, yet Jesus calls the temple his father’s house and this passage is encouragement to his disciples to reassure them that he will not abandon them. The members of Rodney’s family were active members of the Pentacostal church, yet Rodney was rejected by the

³ Eddie Chambers, ‘My Catechism: The Art of Donald Rodney,’ in *Third Text* no.44, Autumn 1998, p. 53

⁴ In October 2021 funding was finally increased. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2021/10/nhs-announces-deal-for-life-changing-sickle-cell-treatment/>

church community at an early age due to his illness and he consequently suffered a crisis of faith. 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, indeed in 1983 he became the youngest person in the UK to have a double hip replacement. At Trent 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. In 1982 they joined the Pan-Afrikan Connection which included Claudette Johnson and Marlene Smith; later known as the BLK Art Group they exhibited at Battersea Arts Centre in 1984. 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. 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. He studied for an MA at the Slade from 1985-7 and had his first solo show in 1990.

The Cold War had ended in 1989, and in the same year Rasheed Araeen put on the major 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 had been freed from jail in apartheid South Africa. In Britain Thatcherite entrepreneurism and business funding of the arts had resulted in Damien Hirst's 'Freeze' graduate show in 1988, and in Charles Saatchi (of Saatchi & Saatchi, Conservative Party advertisers) collecting and promoting the predominantly white Young British Artists (YBAs). In May 1997 the Labour party under Tony Blair won the election promising a new era for the arts - 'cool Britannia'. Yet in 1993 Stephen Lawrence had been murdered on a street in South London. Issues around race and masculinity were still central to the agenda of Black British artists. Next generation black British artist Chris Ofili (b. 1968) exhibited at Saatchi's 'Sensation' exhibition in 1997, but Rodney did not live long enough to see Ofili become the first black artist to win the Turner Prize in 1998 with this multimedia work in memory Stephen Lawrence 'No Woman No Cry' (Tate).

DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

The photograph is an artwork which presents an existing artefact. The original tiny fragile sculpture was constructed from pieces of Rodney's own skin removed during one of the many operations he underwent to combat sickle cell anaemia. It is cut and constructed, secured with pins. It exists as an independent work, titled My Mother. My Father. My Sister. My Brother 1996-7 (The Estate of Donald G. Rodney, London)⁵, pointing to the inherited nature of the disease but also to the close family lineage, and the importance of home when one is sick. The use of shocking, often bodily materials, is usually associated with the Young British Artists (YBAs) group of the 1990s - Marc Quinn had used his own blood to create 'Self' in 1991 - yet the use of non-fine art materials and construction and assemblage techniques dates to the early twentieth century European work by Picasso and the Russian Constructivists. The Tate work In the House of My Father is a large scale colour photographic image of Rodney's left hand on a hospital bed holding the sculpture. It is a kind of documentary record of his experiences in hospital as a patient, while still maintaining his creative life as artist. The artist and artwork are one and the same. The image was taken by the photographer Andra Nelki while Rodney was in Kings College Hospital, London, making work and preparing for his final exhibition at the South London Gallery. As usual he turned his shared hospital room into a studio.

⁵ *My Mother, My Father, My Sister, My Brother*, 1997, skins, pins, tape, 2x3x2cm (unframed) - The Estate of Donald G Rodney. On loan to Amgueddfa Cymru - National Museum Wales

This artistic production exists parallel to the hospital's extensive data, including X-rays and photographs, which he sometimes incorporated into his work. For example, *The House that Jack Built* from 1987. 'His use of X-rays was not to draw attention to the blood disorder that was slowly corroding his body. Instead, he used X-rays as a metaphor to represent the 'disease' of apartheid, the 'disease' of police brutality and the 'disease' of racism that lay at the core of society.'⁶ The photograph on the invitation to his 1996 exhibition *The Visible and the Invisible* at the Wellcome Trust, shows his overstitched scars created with needles piercing living skin, rather than pins through dead skin. The photographic nature of the work makes the viewer aware of a captured moment, before his imminent death, when his living skin holds the dead parchment-like skin of the house. It also confronts the racist myth -the result of the slave trade, that black skin is tougher than white skin. Through the photograph we confront loss, yet in the image his body lives forever. Symons suggests the small house viewed from the outside seems abandoned, the pins holding it 'keeping body and soul together'.⁷



3. WAYS IN HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED IN PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

At the time the work was made, it was primarily read in terms of race and ethnic identity politics. Yet the male hand in the photograph is a reminder of the autobiographical psychological father-son relationship in the title and hence relates to gender identity. Its direct relationship with disease also locates it within art science discourse.

In 1998 Eddie Chambers wrote that Rodney '*was always careful to maintain an intelligent and critical distance between himself and his illness. This work was not simply "about" Black people, or "about" sickle-cell [anaemia]. The work was about much wider constituencies and it broadly and specifically implicated all of its viewers, in a variety of ways.*' More recently J Fisher wrote: 'For the West to frame and evaluate all cultural productions through its own criteria and stereotypes of otherness is to reduce them to a spectacle of essentialist racial or ethnic typology and to ignore their *individual insights and human values* - a treatment not meted out to the work of white European artists.'⁸

When not interpreted through the political lens of Black British Art, this work was also connected to 'body art', often created by women artists. Linda Nochlin's term 'body/in/pieces' from 1994 has been applied to this work, with the skin from one part of the body,

⁶ http://new.diaspora-artists.net/display_item.php?id=59&table=artists

⁷ Diane Symons *A Journey through Fragments of Body and Time. Using Psychoanalysis and Discourse Theory to interpret 'In the House of My Father' by Donald Rodney* - unpublished MA thesis

⁸ Fisher, J. (2005) 'The Syncretic Turn' In: Kocur, Z. and Leung, S. (eds) *Theory in Contemporary Art since 1985*: Oxford: Blackwell.

contained within another part. By showing only the hand, we are reminded of the absence of the whole person.⁹

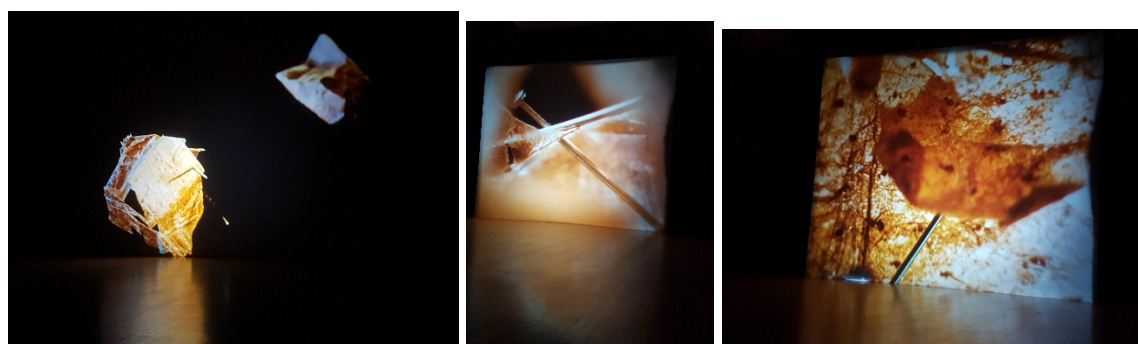
In May 1996 works by Helen Chadwick (who had recently died from cancer) were exhibited alongside Rodney's work in 'Body Visual: Artists Examine the Essence of Medical Science'. Rodney was a patient in a hospital making art from his bed (as Frida Kahlo had done) as his disease reached crisis point. Dr Virginia Nimarkoh has commented 'For Donal Rodney, his art was indeed a testament to his having survived thus far. It was also a tool of self-empowerment - a means of retaining an identity, a survival strategy.'

Apart from the title directly relating to the Gospel of St John, there are other Christian references. Sarah Kent (1997), in a review of the work in Time Out Magazine commented: 'A photograph (In the House of My Father) shows the artist holding it in the palm of his hand as though, like the wheel held by St. Catherine or the severed breasts offered to St. Agatha, this little structure stuck with pins were an attribute to martyrdom.'¹⁰ The pins piercing the skin are also reminiscent of the nails in Christ's hands at the Crucifixion, as is the open hand gesture itself. Reception of the work after his death has sometimes conceived of the house as a container for the soul rather than the body, and even as a relic.

Cultural historian Mark Sealy sums up Rodney's importance: 'There are keepings with his work. One: is his relationship to the state and politics. Two: is his relationship to the body as a political space, both internally and externally. Three: he was really interested in working with new media and new technologies. One of the great tragedies is that he was becoming very articulate within this space around the end of his career. While a lot of the early work was about montage and mapping ideas out, he became more articulate near the end of his work. Pieces like *In The House of the Father* were particularly interesting. Those little constructed scenarios that he developed were very strong. It was not just about race and politics it's also about the emotive space that Donald was occupying, the constant sense of tension and irony within his work.'

¹¹

The 2018 Turner Prize nominee, bi-racial New Zealand born Luke Willis Thompson, caused controversy with his film Trilogy: Cemetery of Uniforms and Liveries, autoportrait and _Human. _Human is a large-scale close-up film exploring *In the House of My Father*. Like Rodney Thompson also has a hereditary illness, in his case Huntington's disease.

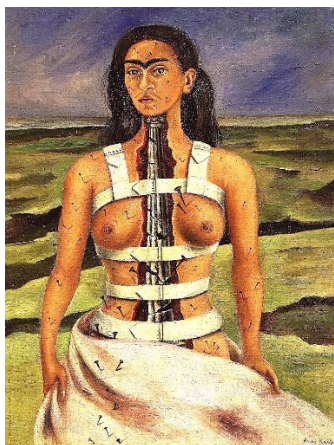


⁹ Nochlin, L. (1994) *The Body in Pieces. The Fragment as a metaphor of Modernity*. London Thames and Hudson.

¹⁰ Sarah Kent. *Time Out* Sept 17-24 (1997).

¹¹ Mark Sealy, <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/display/donald-rodney-display/donald-rodney-display-interviews/donald-rodney-4>

“The current global pandemic provides a new context through which to view *In the House of my Father*, as we all become more reliant on our health care systems and many are also separated from loved ones during our experiences of isolation. Our situation highlights the disparities of social protection people are afforded through productions of race and class. And, it calls into question the sustainability of the structures that support us. As many of us shelter in our homes, Rodney’s delicate house seems to represent a fragility we are all feeling and a desire for comfort and protection in a time of crisis.”¹²



Friday Kahlo *The Broken Column* 1944; Rodney *The House that Jack Built* 1987; Rachel Whiteread *House* 25 October 1993- 11 January 1994

FURTHER READING AND LINKS

Further Reading

Eddie Chambers, ‘My Catechism: The Art of Donald Rodney,’ in *Third Text* no.44, Autumn 1998, pp.43-54

<https://www.southlondongallery.org/exhibitions/donald-rodney-nine-night-in-eldorado/>
[Sept-Oct 1997] *Nine Night Eldorado*, exhibition catalogue, South London Art Gallery, London 1997, reproduced in colour (unpaginated)

Body Visual: Helen Chadwick, Letizia Galli, Donald Rodney, exhibition catalogue, Barbican Centre, London 1996

<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/news/curators-defend-turner-prize-nominee>

<https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/display/donald-rodney-display/donald-rodney-display-interviews/donald-rodney-7>

<https://sites.courtauld.ac.uk/macurating/2019/06/20/work-in-focus-donald-rodney-in-the-house-of-my-father-1997/>

<https://www.ikon-gallery.org/event/talk-dr-jareh-das-and-dr-virginia-nimarkoh-on-donald-rodney/>

<https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp163349/donald-rodney>

A website project containing further information on later works by Rodney can be found at: www.iniva.org/autoicon/
http://new.diaspora-artists.net/display_item.php?id=59&table=artists

¹² <https://ias.ucsc.edu/content/2020/donald-rodney-house-my-father-1997-chloe>

Student Worksheet

What is your first impression of the work? Think of some words to sum up the impact.

Is its impact the result of the scale, or the material, or the framing hand?

How does the use of materials and technique for the original sculpture relate to other sculptural work you have studied? Which other artists have used elements from their own bodies to make art?

Find out more about sickle-cell anaemia. Do you think this work of art enhances your understanding of the disease?

Why is the fact it is a black hand, and black skin so important?

Does the title, 'In the House of My Father', make you think about families, fathers, sons, and/or masculinity? How?

Or does it make you think about God the Father and Christian art? Why?

What kind of house is this? Does it look strong and stable or fragile?

Do you think this artist was politically involved - and part of the Black British Art Movement from the 1980s? What visual evidence do you have?

Is this work of art primarily about disease and disability? Do you think the artist would have considered himself to be 'disabled' or differently-abled?

How does he make something positive out of his own mortality?

Do you think the meaning of this work relates primarily to ethnic identity? Specifically African-Caribbean identity? Try and make 6 key points to argue your case.