

KEEPING UP APPEARANCES:

Black artists, state patronage and the politics of visibility

Richard Hylton, Goldsmith College, University of London

INTRODUCTION

Britain's 'love affair' with multiculturalism has had its ups and downs over the years. However, more often than not, when deemed useful, as in the case of London 2012 Olympics, it rarely fails to be claimed as one of the nation's defining qualities, setting Britain apart from what is perceived to be a less 'tolerant' mindset towards *diversity* and *immigration*, found in mainland Europe. Britain's visual arts sector has arguably, in its promotion and celebration of multiculturalism, for many reasons, come to represent a microcosm of establishment attitudes towards notions of 'plurality' and 'difference'. But what do these attitudes actually amount to? What are the consequences and implications of state-sanctioned, indeed, state-promoted, multiculturalism, with particular regards to the visual arts?

This essay seeks to examine some of the key political, social and cultural factors which have played an influential role in determining the visibility of Black British artists in Britain today. Part I briefly reconsiders the exhibition *Transforming the Crown: African, Asian and Caribbean Artists in Britain 1966-1996*, which, staged in the United States between 1997-1998, to date remains the most substantial Black British survey exhibition of its kind mounted outside the United Kingdom. In using the Black-survey exhibition model, *Transforming the Crown* reprised a curatorial approach toward Black artists adopted by major institutions in Britain during the 1980s and 1990s. Part II considers

the enduring appeal of and problems related to Black survey exhibitions in Britain. Furthermore, in presenting the exhibition in critical isolation to the wider cultural context in which it took place, notably the fad in Britain and the United States for "young British Art" (yBa), *Transforming the Crown* took the marginalization of Black British artists to an international level. However, what is also relevant here about this exhibition is that it took place during a period of change in Britain. Part III of the essay considers how during the late 1990s and early 2000s, under Britain's newly elected Labour government, various curatorial practices and institutional developments primarily aimed at "culturally diverse artists" such as the reductive survey exhibition assumed even greater prevalence, alongside racially specific funding initiatives and flagship building projects. Overall, I argue that despite the outwardly appearance, such activities have largely been counterproductive to the practices, visibility and legacy of the majority of Black British artists in Britain.

I

Between October 1997 and March 1998 the exhibition *Transforming the Crown: African, Asian and Caribbean Artists in Britain 1966-1996* took place in venues in Manhattan and the Bronx.¹ Organised by American curator Mora J. Beauchamp-Byrd, the exhibition featured the work of fifty-seven² Black British artists and was accompanied by an extensively illustrated catalogue (published sometime after the exhibition opened), which included eight essays by a range of international