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Blayney Brown, and Carol Jacobi, eds.  
Artist and Empire : Facing Britain's  
Imperial Past. London: Tate, 2016

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1587 words

Alison Smith, David Blayney Brown, and Carol Jacobi, eds. *Artist and Empire: Facing Britain's Imperial Past*. London: Tate, 2016. 256pp.; color 170 ills. £40.00 (paper) (9781849763431)

Tate Britain, London, UK, November 25, 2015-April 10, 2016.

*Artist and Empire: Facing Britain's Imperial Past* is both a fascinating and frustrating compendium of art made since the sixteenth century that either depicts, reflects, or comments upon, British colonialism. Written by a team of Tate curators, with contributions by Gus Casely-Hayford, Annie E. Coombes, Paul Gilroy, Nicholas Thomas and Sean Willcock, this exhibition catalogue seeks to address the legacies of the British Empire: to reconsider how Empire was recorded and perceived by those artists actively involved in, or affected by, Britain's colonial enterprise; to equitably present and reconsider artworks by indigenous or colonized people; to identify and celebrate artistic cross-fertilization and hybrid adaptation; and to examine artistic post-colonial critique.

Following a Foreword and general Introduction, the publication is divided into six unequally sized sections, replicating the structure of the Tate Britain exhibition that it accompanied. Each section tackles a particular theme or subject, and comprises an introductory essay and a catalogue of artworks, generally presented chronologically. Each artwork is illustrated in color and is supplemented by a short essay. In the main, these catalog texts follow Tate's house style, and include a biography of the artist (if known), a description of the object, information about the sitter, event, or place depicted, and any other relevant information, such as the work's public reception or acquisition history. These essays are written in an accessible manner, avoiding jargon, explaining Art Historical terminology, and are packed with historical detail. Artworks are usefully cross-referenced by page number, enabling readers to navigate within the catalog, and pick and choose the order in which essays are read. Indeed, the short

essays are presented as stand-alone texts, so that readers do not necessarily have to read the adjoining entries, or the section introductions, although this editorial decision has resulted in a modicum of repetition in some instances.

That post-colonial theorist Paul Gilroy agreed to write the Foreword could be regarded as an endorsement of Tate's attempt at post-colonial reappraisal. However, his text is strangely muted; he begins by noting Britain's ignorance of its own past, and argues that in popular memory a filtering out of the corrupt and murderous activities of Empire has taken place, so that what is left is a nostalgic version of heroic gestures and moral superiority. Nonetheless, he welcomes the exhibition as a timely intervention, noting that art has "the capacity to transform Britain's understanding of itself".

To her credit, Alison Smith's Introduction seeks to address some of the issues Gilroy pinpoints. She outlines historical interpretations of Empire, including Britain's problematic, often-ambivalent relationship with it, and the Tate's position as an Imperial institution. If the artworks reproduced in the catalogue are occasionally patchy in subject matter, quality, or geographical reach, this she suggests, reflects the incoherence of Empire, which was an amalgamation of different colonial interest groups and actors. Smith accounts for the limited presentation of slavery, for example, by explaining that few contemporaneous artworks addressing that subject exist; it was too "shameful even to its perpetrators" to be depicted for aesthetic consumption. However, these accounts mask a problematic limitation at the core of the exhibition. *Artist and Empire* included only artworks held in British collections. Limiting the parameters of the exhibition in this way resulted in show that told a history of British museum collecting, which at times appeared adhoc; subject to personal tastes; the aspirations of corporate collections (such as those of the British East India Company); and in the later twentieth century, the institutional prejudice that obstructed the acquisition of diasporic modernists active in Britain. On the subject of slavery, JMW Turner's *The Slave Ship* 1840 (Museum of Fine Art, Boston) was a significant omission. Nonetheless, Smith usefully introduces the curatorial approach of re-framing Empire as a productive ground for cultural exchange. This revisionist position is of course, problematic, but throughout, the curators attempt to maintain a sensitivity to Empire's atrocities, while identifying its artistic legacy.

The first section, “Mapping and Making” is concerned with the territorial landmasses of Empire, and outlines how maps and cartography were put to colonial service. In his introductory essay David Blayney Brown contends that the power of maps is well understood, but for a general reader unfamiliar with the academic terrain of Michel Foucault or Edward Soja, a few additional sentences on spatial power may have been useful. The catalogue contains works ranging from John Thomas’ pictorial map *The Siege of Enniskillen Castle*, 1593; a sketch of the Polynesian Society Islands made in 1769 by Tupaoa, a Tahitian diplomat; and John Everett Millais’ *The North-West Passage*, 1874.

“Trophies of Empire” follows, and considers how the Empire was collected and archived. Paintings and drawings of exotic animals; flora and fauna; landscapes; and architectural typologies are all included here. So too are ethnographic photographs recording different Indian castes, highlighting that the collecting, recording and classification of people was central to the maintenance of colonial power. Annie E. Coombes’ provides an extended discussion of four related items: two looted Benin Edo bronze heads; a photographic print of the imprisoned King of Benin taken in 1897; and a contemporary etching by Tony Phillips addressing how Benin bronzes have been decontextualized within western museums of art.

“Imperial Heroics” starts with a useful definition of History Painting, and goes on to provide an overview of the genre as a mode of propaganda, memorialization and celebration; recording scenes of heroism or “patrician benevolence” for distribution ‘back home’. Military Art, as a sub-genre is introduced here, and Smith discussed how the painted battle scene could be harnessed to sway public opinion and strengthen imperial resolve. However, it is unfortunate that this section is titled as it is; Agostino Brunias’ *Sir William Young Conducting a Treaty with the Black Caribs on the Island of St Vincent*, c.1773 seems to call into question the nature of Imperial heroism, and the section’s title does not seem to capture the spectrum of positive and negative representations included- perhaps we are meant to read it ironically?

Caroline Corbeau Parsons introduces “Power Dressing”, comprising grand manner portraiture: full length portraits, in which the subjects are often dressed in ‘local’

costume. Paintings including Anthony Van Dyke's *William Fielding*, c.1635-6, and Joshua Reynolds' *Captain John Foote*, 1761-5 depict their subjects in Indian dress, and may be regarded as expressions or exertions of power. However, Corbeau Parsons also refers to the scholarship Tara Myer (2012), who asserted that in some cases the mimicry may be a form of "flattery, even homage". The 1919 portrait by Augustus John of T.E. Lawrence in Arabic costume may fall into this latter category.

"Face to Face" is the longest section of the book and contains a substantial number of works by non-British/European artists. The section seeks to address the presentation of, and self-representation by, colonized people, and the development of hybrid, transcultural modes of visual expression. Like the previous two sections, portraiture dominates, with some artworks, such as Simon de Passe's *Portrait of Pocahontas Aged 21*, 1616, epitomizing the ideal of the noble savage; although Carol Jacobi's catalog essay for this painting does de-bunk the subject's Disneyfied biography. On the subject of cross-cultural exchange, Indian artist Manchershaw Pithawalla's paintings are referred to as "optimistic westernization" (following Partha Mitter), while in his discussion of early twentieth century wood and bronze figure sculptures from Nigeria, Gus Casely-Hayford notes that for "aspirational individuals" the adoption of Western culture could have "palpably positive benefits".

Works from the early twentieth century straddle "Face to Face" and the final section, "Out of Empire" and there is an uneasy transition from the high Imperialism of the Victorian age to the era of Independence after 1945. Nonetheless, in "Out of Empire" Carol Jacobi attempts to narrate the rise of anti-colonialist and nationalist agendas, as found in Jamini Roy's *Santhal Drummers*, c.1936, which embodies an "aesthetic of the subaltern" (citing Natasha Eaton). Ronald Moody, Benedict Enwonwu and Uzo Egonu are all noted for their engagement with Parisian Negritude, and the arrival of Commonwealth artists in Britain in the 1950s and '60s is recounted. However, the selection and discussion of Aubrey Williams, Avinash Chandra, Balraj Khanna and others, suggests an over-reliance on Rasheed Araeen's catalog for his groundbreaking exhibition, *The Other Story: Afro-Asian Artists in Post-War Britain* (1989). Here, Sonia Boyce becomes representative a generation of Black British artists who rose to prominence in the early 1980s; The Black Audio Film Collective's *Signs of Empire*, 1983, and Chila Kumari Burman's *Convenience Not Love*, 1986-87, are but

two works that could also have been included, but these suggestions also highlight the absence of overtly confrontational work from in the 1980s. Two works by contemporary Australian artists of aboriginal heritage – Judy Watson and Brook Andrews- become tokenistic, although their accompanying texts by Nicholas Thomas are pithy and engaging. Again, these inclusions simply serve to highlight omissions: Where for instance, are the examples of contemporary Canadian, New Zealand, or Nigerian, artists who are engaging with colonial legacies? Are no works by Rebecca Belmore, George Nuku, or Yinka Shonibare held in British collections?

In his Foreword Gilroy asserts that although a positive contribution, *Artist and Empire* “will not be the final word” on the subject, concluding that there is still considerable work to be done. He is cautious, and qualifies his praise, and in this spirit, although partial and despite its flaws, this publication is a useful introduction to Britain, its Empire, and its legacies: it collates previously under-appreciated works of art; tackles Britain’s skewed and often myopic understanding of Empire; and reframes it within a post-colonial discourse. And for that, the curators should be praised.