

Lubaina  
Himid

So Many  
Dreams

4.11.2022–  
5.2.2023

Exhibition  
Guide

MUSÉE CANTONAL  
DES BEAUX-ARTS  
LAUSANNE



# Introduction

An influential figure in contemporary art, from the central role she played in the British Black Arts movement in the 1980s right up to her winning the prestigious Turner Prize in 2017, Lubaina Himid (b. 1954, Zanzibar) has constantly explored the possibilities that painting offers while questioning the narratives it conveys. In doing so, she has drawn attention both to aspects of history that have been made invisible and to the extraordinary moments of daily life. Active as an artist for over four decades, Lubaina Himid has also been a pioneering curator, championing artists from the diaspora. Initially trained as a theatre designer at Wimbledon College of Art before completing a master's degree at the Royal College of Art in London, Lubaina Himid has since developed a powerful and singular body of work whose imagery and inspiration draw as much from her interest in theatre and opera, the history of Western painting and textile patterns from around the world, as from her exploration of colonial histories and their contemporary repercussions.

Comprising brightly colored paintings, monumental installations, and sound environments, *Lubaina Himid. So Many Dreams* offers a unique opportunity to discover the scope and depth of the artist's work. The exhibition unfolds along several narratives that touch on the question of places and their histories, historical memory and its resurgence in the present, and the transmission of certain stories through color, patterns, and sound. Narrative is never straightforward or linear. The artist creates spaces in her paintings which invite us to question the place each of the depicted figures occupies and the place we, too, occupy. The exhibition galleries unfold like the scenes of a play in which visitors are active participants.

Series of paintings, including *Revenge* (1991-1992), *Plan B* (1999), and *Le Rodeur* (2016-2018) have been brought together here for the first time, generating a dialogue with works from every period of the artist's output, from the famous installation *A Fashionable Marriage* (1984) to the most recent sound installations like *Old Boat/ New Money* (2019) and *Blue Grid Test* (2020). "What are monuments for?" "What does love sound like?" "How do you distinguish safety from danger?" Through her luminous and powerful body of work and the questions it raises, Lubaina Himid offers us views of history that have been revisited through the prism of the imagination.

# 1<sup>st</sup> Floor Gallery 1

## “We Live in Clothes, We Live in Buildings— Do They Fit Us?”

By way of an introduction to her show, Lubaina Himid greets visitors with large flags inspired by kangas, colorful lengths of cloth from East Africa that have a number of uses. From this moving and poetic environment, the artist then leads us into the first gallery, featuring works that deal with different aspects of our relationship to constructed space, be it the space we inhabit at the present time, the space that monuments urge us to recall, or finally the space that remains to be imagined differently.

A series of recent paintings called *Metal Handkerchief* (2019) that stretches over a curving wall references the language of health and safety guidelines that dictate the way buildings may be constructed and used. Echoing this installation, the sound piece *Reduce the Time Spent Holding* (2019), created by Magda Stawarska-Beavan, borrows the words written out in these paintings and has Lubaina Himid whisper them in a recording heard in the space. The intimacy of her voice blends with the impersonal hubbub of construction noise.

By questioning certain norms and rules, Lubaina Himid draws attention to the necessity of being able to create and modify our own living spaces. She invites us to think about the kinds of places that might fuel our creativity and the tools and materials we require to imagine and create freely. The artist raises these questions, “What kind of buildings do women want to live and work in? Has anyone ever asked us?”

Her dreams of other kinds of architecture – enveloping, curved, with spacious light-filled interiors that open onto inner courtyards but are also oriented towards the blue expanse of the ocean – are found in the paintings from the late 1990s, including *Country House* and *East Wing West Wing*, seen here.

In *Three Architects* (2019), once again we see those dreamed-of buildings but in the form of small models under the watchful eye of three architects and in a space where inside and out meet through a purple surface that stretches over the floor, suggesting simultaneously a rug, a geographic map, even the sea. On the horizon, beyond the windows, there is a rough gray ocean, a recurrent element in the artist’s work. This ocean opens out towards the unknown and new possibilities, but also evokes traumatic stories of involuntary crossings, passages under duress, forced migrations.

These stories are recalled in the installation titled *Jelly Mould Pavilions for Liverpool* (2010), a monument that is the outcome of a fictitious architecture competition mounted by the artist to commemorate the African diaspora’s contribution to the wealth and culture of Liverpool.

# 1<sup>st</sup> Floor Gallery 2

This gallery brings together a series of canvases and works on paper that explore the theme of the sea in an almost abstract way, using geometrical patterns to suggest water or, on the other hand, juxtaposing different fabric patterns and seascapes. Indeed, the sea is nearly always present in Lubaina Himid's paintings, and patterns are central to her practice. As the artist explains, "Patterns often exist to represent the sea or a memory of the sea. Occasionally they act as signifiers of place. Sometimes they are the background music to the narrative, the hidden script, the underpinning." In the late 1990s, during a two-month residency at Tate St Ives in Cornwall, Lubaina Himid produced a series called *Plan B* that comprises over seventy works on paper done in charcoal, pastel, collage, and paint. Working from a lifeguards' hut that was turned into a studio, the artist spent her days observing the sea and the shifting color of the water and sky to capture and reproduce the sensations and reminiscences they generate. Thanks to the narrow framing of the image, with the sea sometimes appearing only through tiny openings, the artist underscores a form of solitude and interiority that offers a clear contrast with the usual depictions of the ocean. Here Lubaina Himid conjures up the ambiguity of the beach, which is both a recreational place but also a traumatic transitory place, where Africans, who were enslaved and brought against their will to the other side of the Atlantic in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. As the artist wonders, "How would you make

# "How Do You Distinguish Safety from Danger?"

sense of a place like the ocean, if you've never seen it before? How would you paint it?" Some works in the series include text, fictional narratives of exile and flight. The human accounts are visually doubled, and are varied like musical refrains.

In this gallery and on the upper floor, the artist has arranged wooden wagons in which she has painted different animals. The wagons refer to the origins of Western theater, when shows took place in the street on wagons that would be drawn from town to town, while also suggesting the forced movements of people. As an allegorical echo of the experience of refugees and migrants, whose otherness is disparaged, some of Lubaina Himid's paintings depict dangerous-looking creatures, like tarantulas and jellyfish. Through this work, the artist draws our attention to the fact that people who are forced to flee are often looked down on as "others"; she invites us to think about our role in the face of these instances of being uprooted, asking us, "What would we do if this happened to us?"

# 1<sup>st</sup> Floor Gallery 3

# “What Does Love Sound Like?”

Since the 1980s, Lubaina Himid has been producing works in which she incorporates sound to heighten their theatricality. For several years now, she has been working closely with the artist Magda Stawarska-Beavan on her sound installations. Invited to do a work at WIELS–Centre d’art contemporain in Brussels, Lubaina Himid imagined a painting made up of patterns that would wrap around the exhibition space like a horizon line. Created with Magda Stawarska-Beavan, the installation *Blue Grid Test* offers a reflection on the question of rhythm, both musical and visual. The piece comprises sixty-four blue patterns from around the world painted in a continuous thin line that runs over found objects. The whole is worked into a sound environment.

For the latter, the artists wanted to create a dialogue with musical patterns suggesting the color blue. They agreed on the choice of Joni Mitchell’s song “Blue,” and the two studied its structure, score, number of measures, etc., in order to single out and codify the motifs. Lubaina Himid then imagined a text made up of phrases and bits of verse on the color blue in all its shades, from cobalt and sea blue, to light blue and indigo. What we hear then is the voice of the artist pronouncing this collection of phrases in three languages, English, Flemish, and French, in place of Joni Mitchell’s performance in the original song.

In a poetic text published in the exhibition catalogue that touches on her sound collaborations, Lubaina Himid writes:

*What does love sound like?  
What does blue sound like?  
What does the city sound like?  
What does making sound like?  
What is the sea and exactly how much  
water is there in it?*

*What does this much water mean?*

*[...]*

*Songs have rhythms and melodies*

*Patterns have shapes and colors*

*We speak to each other; they speak to  
each other...*

*[...]*

*Learning to listen is the most important  
lesson I have learned during my life of  
speaking with artists.*

*Learning to listen intelligently, deeply and  
carefully to the world and to the narrative  
I use to interpret my life is the most important  
lesson I have learned during the past five  
years.*

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor

The sound of waves welcoming visitors on the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor comes from the monumental piece *Old Boat/New Money* (2019) and resonates with the paintings from the *Revenge* series (1991-1992) that are displayed opposite the installation.

The latter all reference history paintings from the 19<sup>th</sup> century or artworks from the 20<sup>th</sup>, but they transform the meaning of these earlier pieces by introducing different figures and other narratives into them. Indeed, Lubaina Himid opens up the space of representation to the presence of black women as the central subjects of her paintings and as individuals in their own right. She paints them in twos as they talk, make plans and act together in contexts where historically they were neither seen nor existed as main protagonists. In *Between the Two my Heart Is Balanced* (1991), for instance, two women are seated in a rowboat with a pile of documents between them. They are shown tossing small blue fragments of the documents into the sea. The composition is inspired by a canvas painted by James Tissot (*Portsmouth Dockyard*, around 1877, Tate Britain, London) that depicts a British soldier seated in a small boat flanked by two white ladies he is apparently courting, with several ships in the background. Lubaina Himid swaps out the central figure of the soldier for a stack of colored documents representing maps and navigation charts, symbols of the British Empire and its colonial expansion. As in Tissot's painting,

## “What is the Strategy?”

framing the composition narrowly on the boat invites viewers to enter the scene and take a position – here, to row with the two black women, destroy the navigation charts in order to imagine a past in which the trafficking of human beings had never taken place, and so redo history; or, on the contrary, to preserve it.

In *Act One No Maps*, two black women are seated at the opera. This composition is inspired by Impressionist works painted by Auguste Renoir and Mary Cassatt. In *Five*, they are shown discussing, seated at the table. We can imagine them talking about the history of the Atlantic slave trade, suggested by the thin white dotted line connecting, like so many sugar crystals, the map of Africa to a flag that refers to the American continent.

In a far more abstract register, the sound installation *Old Boat/New Money* also references the triangular trade. On each of the wood planks arranged in two large waves, Lubaina Himid has painted cowries, those small shells used to great advantage by Europeans as currency in Africa for purchasing goods but also human chattel. The planks are themselves painted in various shades of gray, which bring to mind the sea and sky of Great Britain, while the sound of the sea, the break and retreat of the waves, the creak of a wooden boat's planks seem to bear within them the memory of all the lives lost at the bottom of the ocean.

## 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor

Two works that are emblematic of Lubaina Himid's early career are on view at the center of the 2<sup>nd</sup> floor, *Freedom and Change* (1984) and *A Fashionable Marriage* (1984-1986). Both have literally stepped out of the picture frame to spread out in the gallery, referencing the theater stage while revisiting major works from the history of art. The materials used here – canvas, cardboard, plywood, housepaint, collage, etc. – are the same that are employed in the theater for building sets. As the artist puts it, "Trained as a theatre designer, I have always been interested in how acting can be an agent of social change."

In *Freedom and Change*, two women are running barefoot on a beach, their hands joined high in the air in a sign of victory. Pulled forward by four cardboard dogs, they have passed the heads of two pale white men who seem to be buried in the sand. Lubaina Himid has turned here to several forms of reappropriation. There is her reuse of materials, but also her reappropriating of art history. For instance, she borrows her composition here from Pablo Picasso's neoclassical *Two Women Running on the Beach* (1921, Picasso Museum, Paris), taking care to transform its meaning. Unlike the original picture, which underscores the female figures' sensuality by partly baring them, the figures painted by Lubaina Himid have black skin and sport dresses with exuberant patterns fashioned from recycled pieces of cloth. Their future and their fate are theirs alone, and they have literally

## Gathering and re-using

run over and gone beyond the white male gaze, symbolized by the two men they have left behind.

With the installation *A Fashionable Marriage*, Lubaina Himid offers us a pastiche of a painting by William Hogarth, *Marriage A-la-Mode: The Toilette* (around 1743, National Gallery, London). Hogarth's picture depicts various figures interacting inside the bedroom of an adulteress countess, the scene filled with clues indicating lewd and hypocritical behavior carried on in the presence of two black servants. Lubaina Himid has kept Hogarth's original composition but replaced his characters with contemporary figures and the paintings on the wall with imitation Picassos. In this arrangement of elements, the artist is skewering the racism, sexism, and vulgarity of the British art world and the political context of the 1980s. The then-leaders Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan are conspicuously placed, shamelessly flaunting their ultra-free market "love affair." The two lone black figures seem dignified, unsullied, a great step above the others. At the center of the group a woman artist sporting an ocean-dress gracefully dominates the pathetic scene, while in the foreground, a girl with a dreamy look and armed with books is seated on a suitcase festooned with labels from her various travels. The soundtrack accompanying the piece alternates in a loop a baroque composition by Handel, *The Arrival of the Queen of Sheba* (1748), and *taarab* music from Zanzibar.



## 2<sup>nd</sup> Floor

In the final section of the exhibition, Lubaina Himid has brought together a series of recent works that address history great and small, its centuries-spanning story and the personal narratives forming it. While the contexts conjured up in her paintings are grounded in reality, the characters are entirely fictional albeit endowed with lived lives. These individuals exist within interiors that look like stage sets and in scenes that are ready to welcome new possibilities, new identities, new ways of interacting and being connected. Six tailors, for instance, are seated around a table, looking at the others or observing something that lies outside the picture (*Six Tailors*, 2019); three women beneath a lamp are redrawing topographies (*The Operating Table*, 2019); a man is walking, his eyes fixed on a phoenix that flies ahead of him (*Accidental Encounter*, 2021); men depicted in full-length portraiture and in twos are looking at each other or quietly slipping away, or are masked but touching each other, in interactions that fall somewhere between close and standoffish, familiarity and foreignness. All are dressed to the nines (*Remove from the Heat*, 2019; *Cover the Surface*, 2019). As the artist explains, "When you paint men together you can show their tenderness towards each other without them seeming vulnerable – because they are men. So the paintings of men together are actually paintings of how women can be and actually are in real life – tender towards each other but the opposite of vulnerable; strong and trusting, free and funny...

## "What Happens Next?"

The scenes are not real but the atmosphere is my reality."

In a series of paintings titled *Le Rodeur* (2016-2017), Lubaina Himid takes an atrocious historical event as a starting point to explore the interpersonal connections between the protagonists and give them back their individuality. The artist grants them in paint a power and self-possession which they were denied in life. They come and go in stylized settings that suggest the cabin of a ship as much as a living room or salon, as always with the sea somewhere in the background. And in fact, the title of this series refers to the name of the French ship which was transporting enslaved men and women from Western Africa to the Caribbean. Nearly all the people on board were struck blind by a terrible infection that raced through the crew and the wretched African "cargo" in 1819. Nearly forty captives were tossed alive overboard at the captain's orders. As in the rest of her work, Lubaina Himid does not directly depict this traumatic event but rather conjures up its ghosts and echoes, superimposing the past over the present. As the artist puts it, "The *Le Rodeur* paintings were about fear of the unknown and terror in the everyday... They depict a world upside down but one in which the protagonists are trying to work out how to be."

# To listen to

Podcast: "En voix directe"  
Lubaina Himid talks about some  
of the works featured in her  
show, and more generally about  
her practice



Video: exclusive interview with  
Lubaina Himid about her favorite  
themes and her relationship to  
the artworld



# Organisation and Publication

Exhibition organised by  
Tate Modern, London,  
in collaboration with MCBA

Curated by Michael Wellen,  
Curator, International Art,  
Tate Modern

Curated at MCBA by Nicole  
Schweizer, Curator of  
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at the MCBA Book- and Giftshop  
during the exhibition  
→ [shop.mcba@plateforme10.ch](mailto:shop.mcba@plateforme10.ch)

# Events

Limited capacity.  
Register online:  
→ [www.mcba.ch](http://www.mcba.ch)

Guided tours (in French)

Thursday, 17 November,  
15 December 2022 and  
19 January 2023 at 6:30pm  
Every Sunday at 11am  
Except 25.12.2022 and 1.1.2023

Final guided tour with the  
exhibition curator (in French)

Sunday, 5 February 2023 at 3pm  
With Nicole Schweizer

Guided tour (in English)

Sunday, 29 January 2023 at 2pm

Guided tours for the Ami·e·s  
du Musée (in French)

Tuesday, 15 November  
at 12:30pm and Thursday,  
17 November 2022 at 6pm  
With Nicole Schweizer

Conversation with the artist  
(in English)

Thursday, 1 December 2022  
at 6:30pm  
Lubaina Himid in conversation  
with Kadiatou Diallo, curator  
and researcher, University of  
Basel, and Nicole Schweizer,  
curator of the exhibition  
Free admission

Les Urbaines Festival

2-3-4 December 2022  
As part of its 2022 iteration and  
in conjunction with the Lubaina  
Himid show, Les Urbaines  
Festival is presenting a program  
of performances in the MCBA  
Auditorium

Detailed program at  
→ [www.urbaines.ch](http://www.urbaines.ch)

Sound piece by the association  
Reliefs

“Voices of resistance”

Saturday 4 and Sunday  
5 February 2023

A polyphony of voices from  
asylum seekers living in the  
Canton of Vaud is set in dialogue  
with the works of Lubaina Himid  
in one of the exhibition’s  
galleries. The association  
Reliefs also organizes a  
participatory workshop in  
MCBA’s education studio.

A sound piece awaits you in  
the MCBA elevator throughout  
the run of the show.

Adult workshop (in French)

“Lines of a Life”

Saturday, 28 January 2023,  
2pm–5pm

Creation of a linocut portrait  
inspired by short poems  
excerpted from Lubaina Himid’s  
*Naming the Money*. In that work  
the artist imagines the life of  
one hundred slaves by  
giving them a name, a voice,  
and a story.

By the artist Mbaye Diop  
Admission: CHF 70.– / 50.–

Creative workshops for kids  
(in French)

“Listen, Create, Express  
Yourself: Dealing with Our  
Differences”

Saturday, 26 November and  
10 December 2022, and  
14 January 2023, 2pm–4:30pm

Workshop to raise kids’  
awareness and sensitivity to  
racism and differences.  
Drawing their inspiration from a  
story and works by Lubaina  
Himid, the kids will work in  
collage and assemblage while  
discussing these themes.

By the Afrofeminist activist  
Ilithyia Gennai and the artist-  
teacher Cécile N’Duhirahe  
6 to 10 years old  
Admission: CHF 15.–

Family tour (in French)

“Paint in a Drawer”

Sunday, 27 November and  
11 December 2022, and  
15 January 2023, 3pm–5pm

The figures painted by Lubaina  
Himid sometimes appear on  
unlikely objects. Participants are  
invited to bring some element  
from their home furnishings (a  
drawer, shelf, chair, etc.) and  
paint it with a motif inspired by  
those on display in the exhibition.

For kids 8 years and older,  
accompanied by an adult

Admission: the price of  
an admission ticket for the  
accompanying adults

Kids activity booklet (in French)

For 7-year-olds and up  
Free, available at the reception  
desk

Program for schools and  
private tours: → mcba.ch

# Information

Hours:  
Tuesday–Sunday 10am–6pm  
Thursday 10am–8pm  
Monday closed  
25 December 2022 closed  
1<sup>st</sup> January 2023 closed

Admission and Online Tickets:  
→ [mcba.ch/billetterie](http://mcba.ch/billetterie)  
Up to 25 years old: free  
First Saturday of the month: free

Access:  
SBB Lausanne train station,  
3 minutes on foot  
Bus: 85, 3, 20, 21, 60,  
Gare stop  
Bus: 6, Cecil stop  
Metro: m2, Gare stop  
Car: Montbenon parking,  
Reduced fee

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Other shows on view this  
winter at MCBA:

Espace Projet  
Sarah Margnetti.  
Supportive Structures  
(Manor Art Prize 2022 Vaud)  
30.9.2022–23.4.2023  
Free admission

Espace Focus  
René Auberjonois –  
Louis Soutter.  
The Return to Innocence  
14.10.2022–8.1.2023  
Free admission

The Collection  
Free admission

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DES ARTS  
LAUSANNE