



BLACK VENUS

Reclaiming Black Women in Visual Culture

Curated by Aindrea Emelife

20 July – 24 September 2023

PRESS RELEASE



Credit: Ayana V. Jackson, *Anarcha*, 2017 © Courtesy of the Artist and Mariane Ibrahim; Delphine Diallo, *Highness – Hybrid 1*, 2011. Featuring: Joanne Petit-Frère, *Nefertiti's Return Crown*, 2010-2011 & *Nefertiti's Return Face Shield*, 2010-2011. © Courtesy of MTAart, Delphine Diallo, Joanne Petit-Frère & JoGoesWest; Ming Smith, *Me as Marilyn*, 1991 © Courtesy of the artist and Pippy Houldsworth Gallery, London.

Terrace Rooms & Courtyard Rooms, Somerset House Pay What You Can

Somerset House is delighted to present *BLACK VENUS*, an exhibition which examines the historical representation and shifting legacy of Black women in visual culture. Curated by Aindrea Emelife, *BLACK VENUS* brings together the work of over 18 Black women and non-binary artists to explore the othering, fetishisation and reclamation of narratives around Black femininity.

BLACK VENUS pairs over 40 contemporary and primarily photographic artworks with a selection of archival imagery, dated between 1793 to 1930, illustrating historical depictions of Black women and the caricaturing of the Black body. Exploring the many faces of Black femininity, the show's contemporary works offer a riotous affront to a centuries-long dynamic of objectification, showcasing all that Black womanhood can be and has always been.

The exhibition mines the complex narratives of Black womanhood through the influences of three perceived archetypes: the Hottentot Venus, the Sable Venus, and the Jezebel. Through the use of these three thematic pillars, *BLACK VENUS* examines the shifting image of the Black woman in visual culture and the complex lived experience that informs the work of cross-generational women and non-binary artists today.

Having debuted in 2022 at New York's Fotografiska, *BLACK VENUS*'s presentation at Somerset House features a new reworking of the themes with over 19 new works and 6 UK-based artists in the line-up. The exhibition opens at Somerset House, following the opening of its residency at San Francisco's Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD).

At the centre of the show's thematic focus is the **Hottentot Venus**, a recurrent archetype throughout visual culture and the epithet given to Sarah Baartman (Ssehura, b. 1789) who, enslaved by Dutch colonists, was toured as a 'freak show' exhibit under this alias. *BLACK VENUS* contrasts archival depictions of Black women, which typify colonial-era

exploitation and commodification of the Black body, with evocative portraiture by some of the most influential contemporary Black image-makers whose work deals with layered narratives of Black femininity. The presentation of these works in tandem invites viewers to confront the enduring oppression and exploitation of Black women and to witness its upheaval in the hands of today's Black artists.

Key to Emelife's development of *BLACK VENUS*'s concept is Thomas Stothard's etching *The Voyage of the Sable Venus from Angola to the West Indies* (c. 1800) and its place in the long-standing exoticisation of the Black woman in visual culture. In the etching, Black beauty is framed within the context of Western classical culture, as the titular 'Sable Venus' rises from the sea on a half-shell, resulting in the predatory attention of the sea god, Triton. This sexual objectification of the Black woman is also exemplified in the trope of **the Jezebel**, explored in the exhibition through the image of performer and cultural icon, Josephine Baker. *BLACK VENUS* examines Baker's own self-awareness as a tool to challenge racial prejudice, satirising Western audiences' colonialist sexual fantasies and their narrow understanding of Black beauty.

In *HOTT-EN-TOT* (1994), **Renee Cox** explores the exhibition's titular inspiration by posing as the Hottentot Venus. The work rejects historical depictions of Baartman in a non-confrontational side profile, with Cox instead turning her gaze towards the viewer. In Cox's vision, the image of the Hottentot Venus defies transposition into other contexts, instead locking eyes and purposefully reclaiming agency and space. Elsewhere, *Miss Thang* (2009), from her psychodrama series 'The Discreet Charm of the Bougies', places its subject amongst the trappings and luxuries of the paradigmatic housewife. *Miss Thang* sees the series' fictional character, Missy, transcend to a place of self-actualisation and enlightenment.

Multiple works in the show build upon contemporary academic discourse on the path to freedom and equity, forged by Black women. **Ayana V. Jackson's** *Anarcha* (2017) and *Black Rice* (2019) offer counterimages to the cruel and dehumanising treatment of the Black women between antebellum slavery and the present day. With their subjects grounded within a nineteenth century historical period, the works present the Black woman in repose and control, while subverting colonial depictions of the forcibly laboured Black body. Jackson acknowledges a metaphorical weight fixed upon Black women and challenges the notion that fragility and vulnerability are attributes that belong exclusively to white women's bodies.

In **Carrie Mae Weems' *When and Where I Enter, the British Museum*** (2007), Blackness is examined by the artist as an affront to the persistence and ubiquity of European colonialism. As Weems places herself among the museum's tourists and ionic columns, she is rendered both anonymous and markedly conspicuous: operating as an onlooker to the harvesting of diasporic histories. The manner in which we view history, subjectivity and artistic ownership is questioned by **Lorna Simpson's *Photo Booth*** (2008). Simpson's installation juxtaposes fifty ink drawings with a host of fifty found photographs - each a photobooth self-portrait. The photographs are at once indicative of their 1940s origins, while amorphous drawings prompt a dislocation from time and context, in search of psychological projections from the viewer.

Participating artists include: **Sonia Boyce, Widline Cadet, Shawanda Corbett, Renee Cox, Delphine Diallo, Joanne Petit-Frère, Ellen Gallagher, Ayana V Jackson, Zanele Muholi, Amber Pinkerton, Tabita Rezaire, Coreen Simpson, Lorna Simpson, Ming Smith, Maud Sulter, Kara Walker, Maxine Walker, Carrie Mae Weems, Alberta Whittle and Carla Williams.**

Aindrea Emelife, curator of *BLACK VENUS*, says: "Rather than simply putting forth a compelling group of contemporary talent, *BLACK VENUS* defines a legacy. At a time when Black women are finally being allowed to claim agency over the way their own image is seen, it is important to track how we have reached this moment. In looking through these images, which span different stages of history, we are confronted with a mirror of the political and socio-economic understandings of Black women at the time and how the many faces of Black womanhood continue to shift in the public consciousness."

***BLACK VENUS* is curated by Aindrea Emelife and presented by Somerset House.** The exhibition opens on **20 July 2023** at Somerset House, London, following its presentation at New York's Fotografiska and San Francisco's Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD).

Ticketed admission is Pay What You Can.

<https://www.somersethouse.org.uk/whats-on/black-venus>

Revisiting the themes of this exhibition with inspiring essays and beautiful reproductions, Aindrea Emelife's new book *Black Venus: Reclaiming the Gaze* is published by Thames & Hudson in Spring 2024.

EVENTS

BLACK VENUS: Aindrea Emelife in Conversation with Sharmadean Reid

This live event sees curator **Aindrea Emelife** in conversation with **Sharmadean Reid**, founder and CEO of **The Stack World**: a media platform for connecting mission-driven women with the goal of moving the needle on gender equality and increasing the global GDP of women's economy. Drawing on Reid's work advancing gender equity and social empowerment, Emelife and Reid discuss how depictions of Black women and socio-economic understandings of Blackness intersect with women's access to leadership. The two embark on a discussion of the legacies and shifting perceptions of Black women throughout history and through to present day.

Held in the intimate environment of Somerset House's Portico Rooms, this live event is also streamed exclusively to members of The Stack World community. Launched in 2021, The Stack World powers communities inside and outside of the workplace to support women on their leadership journey.

BLACK VENUS: Aindrea Emelife in Conversation with Sharmadean Reid takes place in the Portico Rooms, (South Wing, Somerset House) and streams online to The Stack World members on Friday 21 July 2023.

This event is in partnership with The Stack World. Further details and booking information to be announced.

BLACK VENUS x Upgrade Yourself Takeover

The *BLACK VENUS x Upgrade Yourself Takeover* sees the return of Somerset House's after-hours exhibition access for young emerging and aspiring creatives. This free event, specifically designed for 18-30-year-olds looking to break into the creative industry, offers access to the newly launched *BLACK VENUS* exhibition, interactive talks from exhibition contributors and opportunities to network with peers and professionals in a post-show social. This unique opportunity for young creatives to gain industry insights and make meaningful connections is a fantastic way to support their journey towards building a successful career in the creative sector.

Full public programme and booking information to be announced.

- ENDS -

NOTES TO EDITORS

Press images available [here](#)

For further information, please contact: press@somersethouse.org.uk

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Listing Information

BLACK VENUS

Thursday 20 July – Sunday 24 September 2023, Terrace Rooms & Courtyard Rooms, Somerset House; Pay What You Can ticketed admission

BLACK VENUS, curated by Aindrea Emelife, examines the historical representation and shifting legacy of Black women in visual culture. This Somerset House exhibition brings together the work of over 20 Black women and non-binary artists to explore the othering, fetishisation and reclamation of narratives around Black femininity.

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ABOUT AINDREA EMELIFE

Aindrea Emelife is a Nigerian-British curator and art historian specialising in modern and contemporary art, with a focus on questions around colonial and decolonial histories in Africa, transnationalism and the politics of representation. Aindrea is currently the Curator, Modern and Contemporary at EMOWAA (Edo Museum of West African Art), a new David Adjaye designed museum complex and cultural district in Benin City, Nigeria due to open in stages from 2024.

Born in London, United Kingdom, Emelife studied at The Courtauld Institute of Art before embarking on a multifaceted career as a curator and art historian, producing highly acclaimed exhibitions for museum, galleries and private collections internationally and quickly becoming a groundbreaking new voice.

In addition to the Fotografiska, New York, and Museum of the African Diaspora (MoAD), San Francisco, runs of BLACK VENUS, recent exhibitions include *Bold Black British* at Christies, London (October 2021) and *Citizens of Memory, The Perimeter*, London (May 2021). Emelife's first book, *A Brief History of Protest Art* was released by Tate in March 2022, Emelife has contributed to exhibition catalogues and publications, most recently including *Revising Modern British Art* (Lund Humphries, 2022) In 2021, Emelife was appointed to the Mayor of London's Commission for Diversity in the Public Realm.

Aindrea debuted her first column for the Financial Times aged 20 years old, and has been published widely and internationally, including articles in *The Guardian*, *Vanity Fair*, *The Telegraph*, *BBC*, *GQ*, *Frieze*, *The Independent*, *BBC* and *ArtNet*. She features regularly on podcasts, most recently *Intelligence Squared*, *Talk Art*, and *The Art Newspaper Podcast* and is dedicated to public speaking, usually pertaining to discussions of contemporary art, popularising art history and championing female, black or artists of colour.

ABOUT SOMERSET HOUSE

Step Inside, Think Outside

As the home of cultural innovators, Somerset House is a site of origination, with a cultural programme offering alternative perspectives on the biggest issues of our time. We are a place of joy and discovery, where everyone is invited to Step Inside and Think Outside.

From our historic site in the heart of London, we work globally across art, creativity, business, and non-profit, nurturing new talent, methods and technologies. Our resident community of creative enterprises, arts organisations, artists and makers, makes us a centre of ideas, with most of our programme home-grown.

We sit at the meeting point of artistic and social innovation, bringing worlds and minds together to create surprising and often magical results. Our spirit of constant curiosity and counter perspective is integral to our history and key to our future.