

PREFACE

The research and writing for this book began during my pursuit of a Ph.D. in History of Art at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies. Under the guidance of my doctoral advisor, John Picton, I explored the vibrant work of contemporary artists whose creative practices embodied multiculturalism and challenged stereotypes of Africa and its diaspora. As a white American, living in Britain and engaging with its imperial legacy gave me insight into a very different context from my own. I found, for example, the comparison of the American versus British definition of "black" as a racial identity particularly compelling: in the USA, "black" is interpreted as being of African descent, while in the UK, it is used to denote anyone who identifies as non-white. To me, this exemplifies the decidedly unscientific and political basis for such definitions, and the way in which they are used as tools of oppression—as well as to resist oppression. I approached my research with a desire to deepen my understanding of the artists' inspirations and aspirations, and the ambition to enrich art history with their unique work.

When I began my studies, it was September 2000, and the world, quite simply, was a different place. After the September 11, 2001 attacks, the "War on Terrorism" had begun and my family was grieving the loss of my father in the destruction of New York's World Trade Center. I remember a reporter asking me one week later, outside a NYC center set up for victims' family members, if I thought the USA should bomb Afghanistan, and not being able to understand the question. Attack them to protect against another terrorist attack? To avenge my father's

death? My mind reeled. Of course, the USA did attack Afghanistan and this action heralded decades of war—the fallout from which in many ways fuels present-day conflicts. For me, the political is personal, and vice versa. As I have observed the increasing Islamophobia, xenophobia, homophobia, racism, and sexism surfacing in political and civil conflicts in the years that have followed, I realize that it is more important than ever to resist letting fear, grief, and anger subvert our common humanity. The hateful and divisive rhetoric used by those who would perpetrate violence depends on reinforcing the stereotypes that permeate it.

Contemporary British Artists of African Descent and the Unburdening of a Generation honors the work of artists who represent a diverse group of ages, classes, genders, sexual orientations, familial heritages, ethnicities, and beliefs. It is my deepest desire to foster the acceptance of difference and the celebration of that which makes all of us unique, in the face of the suspicion, scorn, or rejection I continue to witness expressed in the wake of violent conflict. When I returned to my studies in London four months after my father's death, I focused on these principles to inspire and sustain me. I moved to Whitechapel, an East London neighborhood settled by multiple waves of immigrants since the Huguenots arrived in the seventeenth century, and the location of one of the largest mosques in the country. I took hope from the ways in which people around me coexisted peacefully and supported one another.

My deepest gratitude goes to the artists without whom this book would not be possible, especially Magdalene Odundo, Veronica Ryan, Mary Evans, and Maria Amidu. Their generosity, patience, and support over the course of the last fifteen years is beyond measure. For his wise direction, unfailing support, constancy, and humor, I want to express heartfelt thanks to John Picton. I am honored to have had the opportunity to work with such a peerless scholar, and to call him a friend. Finally, to Dmitry, who made my dreams come true.

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