

PRESS RELEASE

January 2022

The New
Art Gallery
Walsall

Keith Piper

Jet Black Futures

14 January – 24 April 2022



Keith Piper, *In Search of Four Horses*, 2021-2, four screen video projection with sound. Courtesy the artist. Photo: Ilona Zielinska (Elona Photographer)

Keith Piper's creative practice is research-driven and responds to specific social and political issues, historic relationships and geographical sites. He works across a wide range of media. Piper is perhaps best known as a founder member of the BLK Art Group, who in the early 1980s, were instrumental in confronting the art world to recognise its lack of inclusivity and to build awareness of a growing community of Black and Asian artists. This exhibition however, focuses on brand new works and celebrates Piper's distinctive practice and continued relevance as an artist who can excite and challenge us.

Jet Black Futures is an ongoing project, which, in Piper's words, "encompasses a number of existing and proposed works, texts and interventions, exploring issues of race, speculative futurism and technology in an age of anxiety." The title of the exhibition is deliberately ambiguous. "Blackness" could relate to social, cultural, political and racial categories but also alludes to modernity and technology as well as the absence of light. Piper alludes to a range of storytelling traditions such as Biblical tales, Greek mythology and science fiction as rich and complex sources of imagery which can be used as bearers of encoded social and political messages.

In Search of Four Horses is an ambitious and epic four-screen video installation based around an exploration of the myth, metaphor and symbolism of the Biblical story of The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.

At the heart of a multi-layered narrative is Cassandra. According to Greek mythology, Apollo developed a sexual interest in Cassandra and enticed her with the gift of prophecy. When she spurned his advances, he added a cruel twist. Though she would clearly be able to predict the future, she would always be disbelieved and faced with scepticism and mistrust. In 1949, Gaston Bachelard coined the phrase, the Cassandra Syndrome, in which valid warnings are dismissed by others. There is a resounding connection to current debates around climate change, environmental degradation, the mass extinction of species and social and economic equalities.

A new series of banners also entitled *Jet Black Futures* (2021-22) expands and develops the themes explored through this installation. Characteristically, Piper alludes to traditions of storytelling, whether Biblical, mythological or otherwise, to weave together elusive yet compelling narratives. Stylistically, he employs a mixture of painting, drawing, photography and digital tools to create images clearly influenced by the visual language of cartoons, graphic novels, graffiti and memes, and in particular, the works of the late Jean-Michel Basquiat. The use of banners also connotes activism, collective energy and anti-establishment practices.

The exhibition also includes an earlier work, *Surveillance: Tagging the Other* (1991) which was recently acquired for the Gallery's Collections through support from the Contemporary Art Society's Rapid Response Fund. This work was created in response to issues arising in the run-up to the instigation of the European Union in 1992 and was acquired as the impact of Brexit was beginning to be fully realised. The four monitors, installed in a row, show the artist's head being a target of surveillance and control. His body is scrutinised in terms of ethnicity, gender, citizenship and appearance. The soundtrack features fragments of news reports relating to the rise of racist attacks, anti-Semitism and right-wing tendencies across Europe. Although it was made in 1991, the work remains hauntingly pertinent.

An additional body of existing work included in the exhibition is the series of nine prints entitled *Pulp Fictions*, originally showed as part of the exhibition *Unearthing the Banker's Bones* (2016-17). The prints appear like covers of well-thumbed paperback science fiction books. These are imagined novels which draw on characters and themes drawn from the broader exhibition. Science fiction plays on our fears of infiltration, invasion or disruption and remains a significant influence on Piper's work.

Jet Black Futures should have opened in Autumn 2020 but was severely impacted by the pandemic. It was rescheduled for Autumn 2021 and then Spring 2022. We could never have anticipated the global events of the past two years, elements of which would have been more fitting, ironically, to a science fiction novel. As an artist who responds to contemporary concerns, the development of the project has been challenging. However, Piper has risen to this challenge to create this incredible new work.

There is no doubt that Keith Piper has made an indelible mark on the relatively recent history of art. He continues to compel and to challenge us through his powerful and hugely relevant work. It is a great pleasure to be able to share this body of new work alongside some key moments from the past.

Biography

Keith Piper grew up in Birmingham and studied in Coventry, Nottingham and the Royal College of Art, London. He was a founder member of what came to be known as the BLK Art Group which was formed in Wolverhampton in the early 1980s with a range of artists including Eddie Chambers, Donald Rodney and Marlene Smith. His initial interests in collage and print media contributed to a pioneering use of early computer technology, not only as a tool for video editing and effects but also for its potential interactivity. Piper works across a wide range of media. He has shown his work extensively with many solo exhibitions including Ikon Gallery, Birmingham, Camden Arts Centre, London and The New Museum, New York. Recent exhibitions include *Body Politics* at Wolverhampton Art Gallery (2019), *Mic Drop* at Beaconsfield Gallery, London (2017) and *Unearthing the Banker's Bones* at Bluecoat Gallery, Liverpool and New Art Exchange, Nottingham (2016-17).

Publication

A publication accompanies the exhibition with essays by Keith Piper and Anjalie Dalal-Clayton. It is published with partners Wolverhampton Art Gallery and Middlesex University London with support from the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art.

Digital exhibition guide

An exhibition guide is available here;

<https://thenewartgallerywalsall.org.uk/digital/keith-piper/>

Events

BSL (British Sign Language) Tour

Thursday 24 March, 2pm

Join us for a very special tour of Keith Piper's exhibition *Jet Black Futures* lead by Deaf artist Olivier Jamin, offering an insight into the art works from a deaf artist's perspective.

Please meet at 2pm in the Gallery Foyer.

Free but booking essential. Please email alex.iolly@walsall.gov.uk

In Conversation

Thursday 17 March, 6 for 6.30pm

Join artist Keith Piper in conversation with Anjalie Dalal-Clayton

£3. Please book at the Gallery Reception or email: info@thenewartgallerywalsall.org.uk

Note to Editors

For further information and press images, please contact

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About The New Art Gallery Walsall

The New Art Gallery Walsall presents, collects and interprets historic, modern and contemporary art in innovative and challenging ways, welcoming visitors from all over the globe as well as their immediate locality. The New Art Gallery Walsall is funded by revenue support from Walsall Council and Arts Council England.

For opening hours, visitors are advised to check with the gallery before visiting

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