Painter Lubaina Himid on inequality in the art world: 'Creative practices are being squeezed'

The celebrated artist, who has curated a Manchester show, reflects on homelessness, urban life and opportunity

"I will never forget the day the bailiffs came. I remember running up the street to try to stop them." The picture of elegance in her navy pleated blouse and chunky yellow beads, Lubaina Himid does not look as if she has grappled with the threat of homelessness.

Her air of composure is to be expected. Himid is one of Britain's most acclaimed contemporary artists. Yet despite winning the Turner Prize in 2017, and having a retrospective at Tate Modern four years later, she knows what it is to be vulnerable. For decades, the black British artist — like many of her peers — was consigned to the margins by a white arts establishment.

Himid built up a fine career as a curator, focusing on black artists such as Claudette Johnson and Sonia Boyce, and as a teacher, becoming professor of contemporary art at the University of Central Lancashire. Yet sometimes, as she puts it, "a bill or two didn't get paid" and she found herself "just two steps away" from the streets.

These experiences are part of the engine driving *A Fine Toothed Comb*, a new show that Himid has curated and in which she participates at the aptly named HOME, a culture

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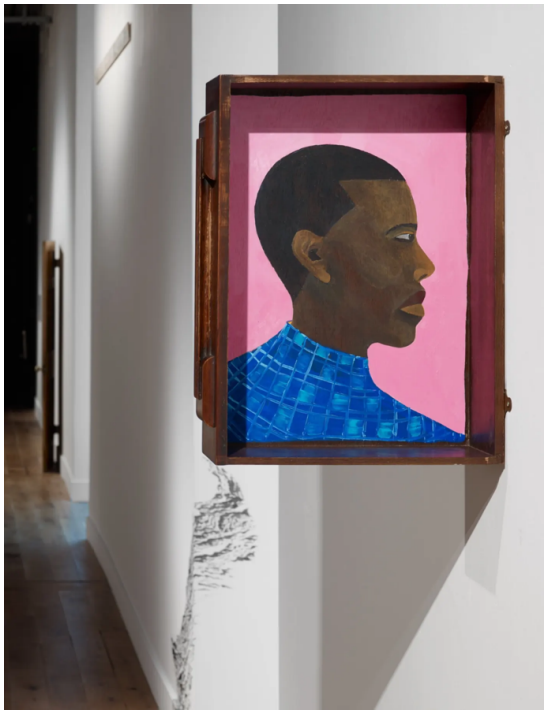
centre in Manchester. Although the northern metropolis has more multimillionaires than anywhere other than London, it is also stricken by inequality. Currently, nearly 7,500 people are without a fixed address.

'Fire Brigade' (2023) by Lubaina Himid



'Man in a Pyjama Drawer' (2023) by Lubaina Himid

Homelessness is one strand woven through the show's exploration of belonging. On the day I visit, in mid-installation, a vast swath of cotton flows through the main gallery. Printed with an illegible cartography of overlapping scarlet bands, it is based on real urban plans including those for the development of a patch of wasteland close to HOME.

By Rebecca Chesney, the 2023 work — entitled "Cause and Effect" — bears witness to the city's history of development, from its incarnation as Cottonopolis, the textile hub of Britain's 19th-century industrial revolution with its engine fuelled by slave labour in the Americas, to its current identity as a beacon of British regeneration.

"Manchester lacks the green spaces you find in London," Himid observes as she escorts me through the show which, she hopes, will reveal sides to the city that have slipped under the mainstream radar.

No work does this more sensitively than "Surgere" (2023). Tracy Hill's charcoal drawing flows and stutters across a temporary wall as if a flock of birds had left the imprint of their flight. Based on the magnetic energy fields of the city's underground rivers and springs, "Surgere" emerged out of Hill's collaboration with water dowser Deborah Bell and retired geologist Ros Todhunter.

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‘Cause and Effect’ (2023) by Rebecca Chesney

‘Surgere’ (2023) by Tracy Hill

The work’s mystique is intensified by the strains of a string instrument navigating an avant-garde solo. The sound leads me around the corner to “Music and Silence” (2023). The four-screen installation by Magda Stawarska juxtaposes a cellist, Alexandra Rosol, playing Janácek in a music school in the Polish city of Łódź, with performance artist Heather Ross reading (in her head) a poem about silence in Manchester Central Library.

Filmed so that the eye is drawn into architectural heights and hollows — the music school is intricate with neo-Baroque details, the library sternly neoclassical — the sounds and visuals spark through the space to transport the viewer into a hybrid Borghesian city of the imagination. Łódź, known as the Manchester of Poland, shares a history of textile manufacturing.

‘Music and Silence’ (2023) by Magda Stawarska

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“Magda taught me how to listen,” Himid tells me, with a self-deprecating grin. “I used to bumble through the world, not listening. She taught me that Vienna sounds different to Istanbul. Manchester sounds different to London. Even in the same city, she showed me how to understand the differences in the sounds between one street and another.”

A Fine Toothed Comb was born out of Himid’s longstanding ties with the other artists. All based in Preston, they have enjoyed “constant conversations for years and years”. Starwaska’s work will perhaps be most familiar thanks to her collaboration with Himid at Tate Modern, where her oceanic soundscape washed through the galleries.

Chesney’s second work at HOME is “Red, Amber, Green*”* (2020), a sequence of prints, from *The Popular Handbook of British Birds*, in which many species have been greyed out to show they are in danger of being wiped out, in part by construction projects such as those on her textile map. “Rebecca is very interested in how wealth shifts place. The more buildings there are, the less natural world there can be.”

As for Hill, Himid cheerfully admits that originally she had “no affinity at all” for her work. “Tracy works in the rural; she is interested in the geology of the countryside, how it affects your body as you walk through it.” Himid chuckles. “I never go near the countryside if I can help it!” Their differences provoked Himid’s fascination. “I thought: what will happen if [Hill] walks in the city?”

By now we’ve found ourselves in front of Himid’s own work. Frequently, her paintings find their home on found objects: a wooden door bears fragments of patterns from east African kanga textiles — a regular source of inspiration for the Zanzibar-born artist. “It’s that fear of losing what you have,” she murmurs as I ask her about the back story. “You’re looking at doorways and thinking: that’s a possibility.”

Inside wooden drawers, black faces, their expressions inward and opaque, are painted in profile. “I was talking to an artist who used to have to keep moving and she described that feeling of opening a chest of drawers in a flat that isn’t yours — there’s a bit of dust, piece of paper, a hair grip. Somebody else’s life,” says Himid.

Despite her own success, Himid is “still pretty furious” about inequality in the art world and beyond. “Creative practices are being squeezed,” she says, referring to the government’s funding cuts for culture teaching. “I don’t know what I’d do now if I was 20 or 25.”

But Himid doesn’t believe the cuts are a sign that “wealthy people don’t care. They do care. They want to be part of art, to have it and stay in control of it. It’s a mistake to think the Tory government want to quash it. No, they want to keep it close. They don’t realise that sharing is actually a good thing.”

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Lubaina Himid is ‘pretty furious’ about inequality in the art world and beyond © Christian Cassiel

As for her own professional motivations, Himid says she wants “to paint about how bigger historical situations affect my everyday. I’m still very concerned with what women have to say and where the spaces are for us to show experimental work.”

She remains wary of the ostensible parity of opportunity that the art sector has championed of late. After years of erasure, she says drily, she would have no difficulty convincing institutions to let her curate black artists such as Sonia Boyce and Ingrid Pollard. “Because we’ve all got Golden Lions!” (She is speaking rhetorically — only Boyce has a Golden Lion). “But I want artists and art that don’t fit into your categories.”

That risky, generous spirit pulses through *A Fine Toothed Comb*; its provocative yet organic fabric could be the fruit of an artists’ collective. “We’re all tired of that lone genius thing,” observes Himid. “So much richness is exchanged when you really collaborate.”

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