OPINIONS

On Black Art

by Eddie Chambers

NAME TEN CONTEMPORARY ARTISTS WHO ARE BLACK. Struggling? I know the feeling. Five years ago, (*after* I had taken an active interest in Black visual creativity) I'd have found it difficult to name more than one or two. In 1979, this supposed ignorance had to mean one of two things. Either Black artists simply didn't exist, or, if they did exist, their activities were muted, shrouded, ignored. Now, five years later, there is much less excuse for ignorance about Britain's Black artists. Of course, to varying degrees, their work still remains shrouded and ignored, but now, thanks to a number of persons and reasons, art by Black people is being acknowledged and recognised. Not just by the art world, but much more importantly, by Black people themselves. The most recent indication of this acknowledgement and recognition was the self-appointed task of Sheffield's Mappin Art Gallery to bring the work of contemporary Black artists 'Into The Open'.

The emergence of art by Black people has been a multi-layered process, at times difficult and controversial, both to the white (art) word and amongst Black artists themselves. However, in order to examine the state of art by Black people in 1984/5, it is first necessary to set into context and chronological order its emergence. Black artists, just like Black people in general, have long since been victims of racism and intolerance. The absence of art by Black people from the Galleries and Arts Centres of Britain was (and often still is) justified by the view that what most Black artists produced was just not 'good' art, and 'good' art was what these places wanted to show. Similarly, commercial galleries weren't prepared to handle work which they believed 'wouldn't sell'. Over a period of years, this rejection had the catastrophic effect of curtailing and minimalising the work of Black artists. Of this situation, Shakka Dedi, in the November 1984 issue of *Arts Review*, wrote: *'This lack of exhibition venues and opportunities had the effect of stifling artistic expression - thus, preventing its development and progress. Many artists and potential artists ceased to produce work - have little motivation in this dead-end situation.'*

At this time, the only venues to have a written policy of patronising Black and African artists were the Commonwealth Institute, and the Africa Centre, both in London. Other Black artists, not quite so fortunate had to make do with the 'ghettoisation' of their work, ie being able to exhibit only in community centres, youth clubs, libraries, and so on.

It was not until the late 70s that there was any real change in this sorry state of affairs. Pakistan-born Rashead Araeen had been producing work from the age of 14. However, it was not until 1971, aged 36, that, in his own words, he was *'Going through a period of identity crisis, and by the end of the year begins to lose interest in formal art activity. Reading a lot of literature on black/ Third World struggle, in particular* Frantz Fanon's The Wretched of the Earth. *Also reading in a newspaper about the death of Oluwale, (an African down and out) caused by the police in Leeds and then thinking about an art work dedicated to him.'*

In 1978 he founded and edited, (with the help of Mahood Jamal) an art magazine which dealt with contemporary art from a radical Third World perspective. Though now defunct, *Black Pheonix* offered one of the first recognisable challenges to the supremacy of white artists and the white art world. An early *Black Pheonix* editorial stated: *''It would be naive to think that art or cultural activity alone can change the world, or that in our cultural struggle we can ingnore socio-economic forces. However, the struggle within the domain of art/culture against domination can strengthen the overall struggle.'*

Meanwhile, in Coventry, two Black youths from Birmingham and Wolverhampton had just met on their Foundation Course in Art and Design. A year later, in 1980, Eddie Chambers and Keith Piper were making plans for an exhibition by five young Black artists from the West Midlands. These plans culminated in 1981 with the exhibition at Wolverhampton's Central Art Gallery. The exhibition was judged by the Gallery to have been a major success, achieving one of the highest attendance figures for that year. This group, with an ever-changing line-up, but with the continued nucleus of Chambers and Piper, went on to have several exhibitions around the country.

Since 1981, several groups have contributed to the emergence of art by Black artists, for whom lack of inter-communication has always been a problem. This is hardly surprising, in view of the fact that they find themselves on the periphery of an art world that influences them with its philosophy that states emphatically that the artist is an individual IS AN INDIVIDUAL. It was this non-communication that prompted the group formed by Chambers and Piper to organise what they called *'The First National Black Art Convention'*. Quoting the publicity material: *'The basic idea behind the convention is to draw together as many black producers of art as possible. This is because we feel that interaction between black artists/art students provides an excellent opportunity for us to voice our individual and collective opinions on those things which we have in common: being black, and creating art.'* Organised alongside the convention was *'The Open Black Art Exhibition'*. A further quote: *'We are inviting all the black producers of art to submit at least one piece of their work to this exhibition. Within it we aim to provide as broad as possible a cross-section of the work currently being produced by young black people in Britain. It will also act as a starting point for discussion, and give us all a fairly valid idea of what 'black art actually is.'*

It was at this well-attended convention in Wolverhampton that the controversial question *'What is Black Art'* was first discussed in a public forum. The symposium was characterised by the head-on collision of diametrically opposing points of view that emerged during the course of the day. There were those artists who, though Black, saw no real need to connect the production of their work to the political realities of their skin colour. In short, these artists stood for aesthetic individualism. Challenging this were those artists who produced work directly related to the fact that they were part of an oppressed race. Briefly, this group created art because they were Black, and not despite being Black.

Thus emerged two seemingly irreconcilable viewpoints, each being argued as passionately as the other. From this point in time, the production and exhibition of visual art by Black people has been overshadowed by this argument. In fact, every seminar and forum on the subject of art by Black artists has since been dogged by a marked inability to reach any common consensus of opinion as to what constitutes Black art, and who makes it.

The lack of organised communication between Black artists, and the controversy about which, if any, philosophy should govern their creativity are two of the reasons why the emergence of art by Black people has been (and is) an erratic process. It is a process which has repeated itself several times over, thus creating a certain amount of confusion and ambiguity. The process of repetition began in July of 1983 when a South London cultural activist collective, Creation For Liberation, announced that they would be holding what they termed *'The First Open Exhibition of Black Art in Britain'*. Now where have you read that before? CFL's press release read as follows: *'The exhibition is concerned with the work of men and women, some perhaps with no formal training, or who do not make their living as artists, whose work not only expresses the aspirations and preoccupations of the mass of blacks but reflects the dynamism, vibrancy and innovations blacks bring to bear on their approach to life in general.'* A seminar was held to coincide with the exhibition which had the effect of creating a sharper polarisation of opinions about Black people's art.

Several months later, by far the most significant development so far in the sphere of Black people's art took place. This was the opening of The Black-Art Gallery in Finsbury Park, London. The group responsible for the operation of the Gallery was the Organisation for Black Arts Advancement and Leisure Activities (OBAALA). Here at last was a space run by Black people, specifically for the purposes of exhibiting the work of Black and African artists, who up until this point had been ignored/under-represented by Britain's Art Galleries. OBAALA's view of Black art was: *'We believe that Black Art is born out of a consciousness based upon experience of what it means to be an Afrikan descendant wherever in the world we are. 'Black' in our context means all those of African descent: 'Art'; the creative expression of the Black person or group based on historical and contemporary experiences.'*

(Not so) surprisingly, Britain's media, by and large chose to ignore the fact that creativity from the Black community had come out into the open and that a group of Black people had successfully managed to bring an impressive Gallery space into existence and operation. The most recent press release from the Gallery reads: *'Since opening in September 1983, a total of eight shows, with themed titles such as 'Heart in Exile', 'Performers', 'Arts of Rastafari' and 'Soweto Artists' have been staged. Combined, these exhibitions have shown the work of some sixty artists. For some, providing a first time opportunity to exhibit in a professional setting.'*

The previously-mentioned involvement of Sheffield City Art Gallery in many ways seemed to do more to exacerbate the 'Black Art' argument than anything else. The introduction to the exhibition catalogue reads as follows: *'This exhibition is the first major survey by a municipal gallery of contemporary work by black artists in Britain.... The Exhibition, as a first broad look at the work in this area, is necessarily only a sample of the work being produced.'*

The exhibition seemed to be ill-conceived and saturated with compromises. It was a seemingly well-meant attempt that back-fired. There can be few things more humiliating for Britain's Black artists than seeing the opportunity being presented on a plate to Waldemar Januszczak of *The Guardian* to write: *'And all black art is no more worthy of our undivided attention than all white art.'*

Despite this kind of widespread insensitivity and ignorance, the exhibitions continue. Lubaina Himid, a London-based Black artist and art activist last year organised two exhibitions featuring the painfully under-exposed work of Black women artists. These exhibitions being "Five Black Women Artists" at The Africa Centre, and "Black Woman Time Now", a project involving many more women artists at Battersea Arts Centre. The association of young Black artists formed by Chambers and Piper found its identity in The Blk. Art Group, which this year exhibited in London and Birmingham, though Chambers and Piper were also involved in one-person projects. Several new, young Black photographers are also emerging, challenging the dominant anthropological studies of Black people offered by white photographers. David A. Bailey and Marc Boothe are amongst the most active of these photographers. Rashead Araeen continues to produce and exhibit work, in the face of enormous racism and indifference. (His most recent exhibition being at The Pentonville Gallery in the summer). The summer also saw Creation For Liberation's second open exhibition. Incidentally, thanks to the skill and diplomacy of Errol Lloyd, of the Minority Arts Advisory Service, the corresponding seminar, (led by him) was, by and large, refreshingly free of unprogressive exchanges. One of the most encouraging contributions came from CFL's own Darcus Howe, who said that he hoped the 'What is Black Art?' issue would be kept alive and argued for many years to come. Given the fact that Black artists are still finding their feet, such a contribution makes perfect sense.

Eddie Chambers now lives in Bristol.