Bad blood: PM orders inquiry into NHS deaths

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Tate Modern's epic new show celebrates the black artists who captured an extraordinary era in American history. By Karen Wright

Extraordinary times call for extraordinary shows. Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power arrives at Tate Modern at a moment when Europe faces the challenges of dealing with a new America and Britain fees the dilemma of how to remove itself from Europe. This show brings together 250 works by artists working across the spectrum in the period between 1965 and 1983, many of whom are almost unknown in the UK.

Setting the scene is the Spiral, a New York-based black artist collective formed in 1963. Norman Lewis chose semi-abstraction in his monochromatic extraordinary canvas ironically titled America the Beautiful, which depicts the cloaked figures of the Ku Klux Klan, their white gowns discernible almost as an afterthought, a graphic pattern in the murky darkness.

Nearby the scene is set with a room of printed material – posters and newspapers relating to the Black Panthers, whose cultural leader Ericka Huggins proclaimed “the ghetto is the gallery.”

The light between abstraction and figuration continues with the work of Faith Ringgold, one of the powerfully skilled black woman showcased here, with American People Series #29: Die, where black and blood are juxtaposed in almost caricature style. Shocking bright red blood sullies the white shirts of the protagonist, a gun held in the hands of a black man, bound and gagged and not allowed to speak at his own trial.

Hammons frames the work with a defaced, cut-up American flag (thereby breaking the law). He created the body print of a bound and gagged man by smearing himself in fat and grease.

Later, in a room entitled “Juke Above Midtown”, a homage to the gallery that first showed Hammon’s work and that of other avant-garde black artists, we encounter a group of his abstracted sculptural reliefs, including my personal favourite, Bag Lady in Nightgown, made of paper shopping bags, grease and hair. Hammons said of this work that it is not about the degrading of materials but a new kind of pride: “Old dirty bags, grease, bone, hair...should we look at those images and see how positive they are, how strong, how powerful?”

Nearby is the work of Senga Nengudi, whose studio Hammons shared in Los Angeles. She is another of several strong female presences in the exhibition. Internal II shows the strains on a human body that is being twisted and pulled – I imagine in this case by bearing children – made within simplest of materials: nylon tights.

Betye Saar, an artist from Los Angeles whose work has recently, rightly, been internationally fitted, introduces both wit and pathos in her assemblage works. She co-opta and explores images used as shorthand for black people, such as a watermelon. In The Liberation of Aunt Jemima, 1972, Saar depicts the well-known figure whose smiling face was the trademark for the pancake mixes of my American childhood with her traditional broom and a more disturbing shotgun. Her powerful totemic works are worthy of any museum.

Frank Bowling now lives a few blocks from Tate Britain; he came...
given a National Medal for the arts by Barack Obama in 2010. This is an exhibition that is sprawling and could be indistinguishable due to the sheer number of works, but the curators have not put a foot wrong. I would not have put Andy Warhol in the mix, but his silkscreen image of Muhammad Ali placed alongside the graphic works of the recently deceased Barbara K. Hendricks sets up some interesting comparisons. Hendricks’ work includes the poster boy image adopted for the show, Icon for my Man Superman (Superman Never Saved Any Black People – Bobby Seale). Hendricks had taught himself the technique of applying gold and aluminium leaf to canvases that he had observed others do in Europe. Here he turns the image on himself, depicting himself wearing a superhero T-shirt napped from the waist down, although the image is cropped to preserve modesty. So much modesty in Brilliantly Embroidered Europe and to escape the want not to be part of any group, but as he said: “Much of what I was trying to do with my work was to be as good a painter as I could be.” His vision, concept and focus, “life-sized, shows both swagger and valiance.

There is photography and documentation here, and in a show of this scale it is easy to skate by it. Spend time, though, with the eye-popping and thoughtful works of

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Riggolds’ poster series for United States of Afrika highlights the divisions of America. Linger in the room designated “Improvisation and Experimentation” and the large, cloth works of Afro-Levant alongside glorious paintings by Alma Thomas, Bowling and Whitten and Sam Gilliam’s Casual Loop Change, a swooping toilt out of full of pleasure juxtaposed with the barbed wire and chain cain seen the Museum of Modern Art.

What unifies the work is the virtuosically quality of a group of artists, mostly black, who were largely written out of history until recently. Riggolds’ powerful painting of the 1960s was only acquired by MoMA in 2018 courtesy of the Modern Women’s Fund.

So why is this show important at a time when the United States is facing fracture and America in search of its new leadership. Encouraging the return of racism and intolerance, we need art to lift the spirit.

Personally, I left America to escape the very identical splashes of hate we are now facing. I came to England to be safe from the squirming politics of America. Omitting this piece shows clearly. Enjoy its many pleasures and heed its warnings. The INDEPENDENT

‘Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power’, Tate Modern, London, to 22 October (020 7877 8888; tate.org.uk)

Barkley Hendricks’ “Icon For My Man Superman (Superman Never Saved Any Black People – Bobby Seale)” (above), Betye Saar’s “Rainbow Help” (above left), Elizabeth Catlett’s “Black Unity” wood sculpture (below)

Another night, another gritty, but impressive, new crime drama

The first instalment of In The Dark felt as if it should have been screened in autumn. It was launching down for most of the episode, characters were tagged up in parks, and there were falling leaves in the credits. The subject might: gritty murder and decomposing bodies in woods, was cut-up-the-sofa-under-a-blanket stuff.

It’s been at least five minutes since the last gritty British crime series, after all. Line of Duty, Broadchurch, Unforgotten – a genre my colleagues have coined “Gritbo”, a favourite of mine, not least for the baileys female leads.

DI Helen Weeks, played by MyAnna Buring (Upper Street, Downstay Abbey), is one of those straight-talking tough cookies with inner vulnerability. She returned to her home town to investigate the disappearance of two teenage girls. The chief suspect was the husband of an old school friend, with whom she has a past, which no doubt will find out about. We also learn that DI Weeks is in the first trimester of pregnancy, about which she has ambivalent feelings: “I can’t see myself sitting in cafes with my tits out all day,” was one memorable line to partner and fellow “copper” Paul Hopwood, played by Ben Ratt (The Go-Between, Shameless).

With so much delicate fodder out there, shows need a good script and top-drawer acting (take a bow Happy Valley, written by master of naturalistic dialogue Sally Wainwright and starring the peerless Sarah Lancashire). So far, the evidence is that writer Danny Brocklehurst (Ordinary Lies) has done a good job here, particularly in drawing a close-knit Derbyshire community where chat in the pub runs from Facebook to pig stealing, as well as the upmanship in business thanks to the murders coming to town. When crime hits a community, the minimise – and humour – in life goes on more than

Helen Weeks, played by MyAnna Buring, in a ballett-detective

some of those bleak Scandi cop shows would have us believe.

The rest of the cast is strong, not least Sinbad Matthews as another former school friend, Patra Days, and Ashley Walters (Top Boy), who was born to play cocky coopers. The jury’s out as to whether In The Dark will make our Gritbo hall of fame, but this was a good start.

DI Helen Weeks was commissioned beforehand the Grenfell Tower fire highlighted some of the unfurlable truths about our country’s inadequate housing system to those of us fortunate enough not to have first-hand experience of it, but this was a timely, eye-opening watch.

The location, Location, Location brought was helping hard-working, “hidden homeless” families to find long-term accommodation. Correy, Meyern and their young son were living in a coachseats and in at-times flat in local court. Use for demolition – and paying over £5000 a month in rent. Their income meant they couldn’t afford to rent privately in the borough.

In Kent, Bill and her teenage son Oscar’s home had been bought for redevelopment so they were evicted. Bill was a full-time carer for her husband, and Phil had to ask 40 agents to find just one landfill willing to rent to anyone claiming housing benefit.

With a big name on the case, the council binned Correy and Meyern up their list, and Bill Kent, Spencer’s manager persuaded a landlord to consider a tenant on benefits. But the rest don’t have Phil in their corner.

The INDEPENDENT

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