

frieze

Current Shows

Hurvin Anderson

Tate Britain, London, UK

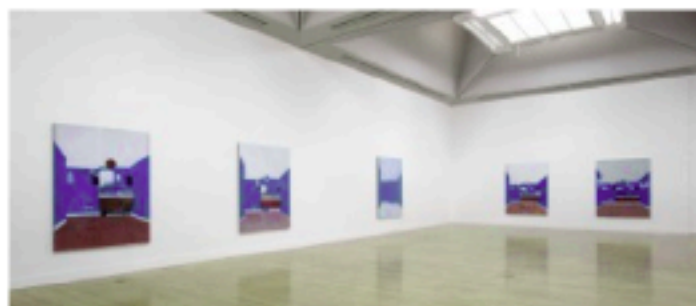


Hurvin Anderson, *Peter's Back* (2008). Courtesy the artist and Thomas Dane Gallery. Credit: Tate Photography

About this review

Published on 13/02/09
by Colin Perry

Hurvin Anderson's meditative suite of paintings, 'Peter's Series' (2007-09), teleports the viewer back to a poorly remembered 1950s Britain. Here, in the intimate surrounds of a sparse blue-hued attic room, newly arrived Caribbean immigrants too poor to rent commercial property have set up a barbershop in their own home. (A common practice among first-wave Afro-Caribbeans, according to Anderson.) The sketchiness of these renderings exudes existential uncertainty: walls, chairs and mirrors seem to melt continuously into the abstraction of anemic winter light. It's a vision of an awkwardly accommodated immigrant culture. Yet, if there's a sense of alienation here, it's also because Anderson's memories are not the vivid ones of a first generation migrant; born to Jamaican parents in Birmingham, England, Anderson follows what Paul Gilroy once called 'routes' (rather than 'roots') culture – a mapping of the paths that weave identity.



'Peter's Series', installation view

Each painting is rendered as a basic tricolour flag: earthy red carpet; blue walls; white ceiling. Mentally subtract the furnishings, and they become northern European seascapes, washed in the gentle tones of Peter Lanyon's St. Ives; mentally rebuild the walls, and you have the drab moodiness of Ivon Hitchen's London Group. Anderson achieves these retro-eggshell hues using a two-layer technique, a haze of white obscuring a base structure of vibrant geometrical form. 'Peter's Series' was made over a three-year period and it forms a record of Anderson's attempts to negotiate between abstraction and figuration. From the near-featurelessness of blue-and-white walls in *Peter's III* (2007), Anderson has slowly populated his images with furniture. In *Peter's Sitters III* (2009), in which a customer is depicted hunched in the barber's chair, Anderson achieves full figuration. The client's hair, however, lies scattered on the ground, melting into the painterly carpet as if the this fragile world is about to rebound back into hazy abstraction once more.

The first time I saw 'Peter's Series', I had a calypso song stuck in my head. It came from the Black Audio Film Collective's seminal *Handsworth Songs* (1986), also currently on view at Tate Britain though as part of the triennial. The song was 'London Is the Place For Me' (1948), by the brilliantly named Trinidadian singer Lord Kitchener, a ditty full of hope, if somewhat wince-inducing naivety. The reality, as those who were reduced to barbershops in attics experienced, was economic and social marginalisation. The immigrant's dream is as fragile as a wish: Kitchener's hopes of assimilation and the intimate pragmatics of making-do can be dashed by the harsh reality of racism, joblessness or police brutality. Anderson's acute formal powers, however, give this condition a sort of nobility. The lone figures in *Peter's Back* (2008), *Peter's Sitters II* and *Peter's Sitters III* (both 2009), look away demurely, displaying their napes to the barber. Yet, in looking away, these figures are also cryptograms. Anderson knows this room and these people – his father used to have his hair trimmed in similar digs – but the community of immigrants is a closed shop. Exile cannot be inherited. Sphinxes do not relinquish their secrets so easily.

Colin Perry