



"With my work I aim to connect with other Black womxn and non-binary people and share the same joy in valuing the power and tenderness in our relationships with one another. Exhibiting with Black Blossoms has been so important for reaching the intended audience for my work, and contextualising it in a way that is not tokenised or fetishised, which I find happens a lot of the time."

Sola Olulode

What does a decolonised future for the arts look like? Black Blossoms School of Art and Culture founder Bolanle Tajudeen connects with artists, curators and educators to imagine new Black feminist ways of seeing

# Black



"Black Blossoms has created a platform to champion Black female creatives by (allowing) our works to be viewed on a larger scale and giving us a voice. Right now, I'm completing my new series of paintings that incorporates the idea of the Holy Trinity, implementing Congolese female sculptures, self-portraits and a ghost-like figure."

Shannon Bono

# Blossoms





## Madelynn Mae Green

“My background in politics guides my paintings, (but) my experiences growing up in the American midwest and south also shape my subjective and material interests. Despite manifesting in paint, (my work is) informed by photography, a Black artistic tradition that (allowed) us to create our own representation in the wake of stereotypical Jim Crow propaganda.”

PREVIOUS SPREAD, left: Sola wears Moss Durian top Chet Lo, taffeta and organza skirt Chopova Lowena, printed headscarf Being Cute, metal and resin necklace Chanel, bracelet and ring her own. Right: Shannon wears silk organza dress Louis Vuitton, Perry dress worn underneath Molly Goddard, jeans, necklaces, ring and socks her own, trainers Converse. THIS PAGE: Madelynn wears leather coat and metal chain necklace Saint Laurent by Anthony Vaccarello, printed top Martine Rose, zebra-print wool jumper worn underneath Guess Jeans, laser denim jeans Ganni, glasses and ring her own, chain loafers Simone Rocha

Bolanle Tajudeen wants to know the ways in which Black women artists see the world: how their seeing, and being seen, takes hold and takes form. In a year when arts institutions are facing an overdue reckoning on their structural racism, the curator and educator launched her very own: the Black Blossoms School of Art and Culture, an online learning platform decolonising arts education. The school is the latest offshoot of a platform showcasing contemporary Black female and non-binary artists started by the artist in 2015, and, in a way, grew out of her popular Art in the Age of Black Girl Magic courses delivered at spaces like the Tate and CSM. For Tajudeen, as for many other radical curators and educators, it was time to shake off the institutional frameworks and strike out on her own. For her guest-edit, she brought together different artists, curators and organisers for a discussion on Black feminist ways of seeing, negotiating the grand institutions and gatekeepers of the arts, and how one can break away from the cycle of forgetting that has sadly impacted the cultural knowledge of the radical Black-led art organisations that came before. After reassuring everyone it wasn't going to be live, Tajudeen connected over video call with Shannon Bono, a multimedia-driven artist who uses the term Afrofemcentrism to describe her work; Annis Harrison, a Swedish-Jamaican artist who led the Black Artists Matter protest this year outside the National Gallery to spotlight the lack of representation on its walls; Alexandria Smith, an artist, head of MA Painting at the Royal College of Art and co-organiser of the collective Black Women Artists for Black Lives Matter; and Lisa Anderson, an art advisor, curator and founder of online curatorial platform Black British Art.

**Bolanle Tajudeen:** I'm going to put it on grid view. Ooh, this looks cute!

**Alexandria Smith:** What if I was like, 'Wait a minute, I object'?!'

**Lisa Anderson:** Yeah, I was about to say, B! Stop and desist, because this is Sunday wear.

**BT:** You look good. You look great. So I really want this to be like a conversation we would have after leaving a gallery, with us radically thinking of ways we could interject and change that space to be more accustomed to us. If we ran the art world, what would it look like? I think about Toyin (Ojih Odutola) and her depiction of Black figures and particularly Black women as mighty – I want us to think about ways of us being in power in the arts and what that means. The first question was proposed by Annis and I think it's a great way to frame this conversation: What does this term, 'decolonise the arts', mean to us? And how do we apply it personally within our practices and lives?

**Annis Harrison:** As a Black woman living in the UK, it means I have to look at my pre-learned knowledge with regards to everything. It's (about) decolonising my own mind, to make sure I'm aware of the Eurocentric system that I have been brought up within, to question that. To dare to critique the system within the art system and (my) practice. Always asking for equality – allowing myself to practise what I want to practise and look at subjects that I want to look at. Believing that what I'm interested in is as valued as anything else within the art world, and recognising that people might not always see it – but that doesn't mean it isn't valued. Also it means that, as a teacher (just) as in my practice, I have to be aware when I talk to my students and my colleagues – and I think that's one of the most difficult things as an art teacher, to try to educate the people that I work with. That can feel incredibly lonely. Meaning that most of my colleagues are white but, of course, our students are not, and I'm trying to make them realise that you have to actually go and re-educate yourself and stop being so lazy, you know? Also to allow the students to explore their own ideas and thoughts – (it's about) recognising that we all suffer from this in a sense and it isn't a quick journey, this decolonisation of the mind.

**Shannon Bono:** I was thinking about (my early) arts education from my GCSEs and A-Levels. How I was taught the 'art masters' and they were always white males, and from there I just thought to myself, this is not a path I can pursue. It wasn't meant for me; I don't see myself at all within these spaces. Then, going to CSM for my masters, the same thing again. They teach about certain African sculptures but from their own perspectives, and it's very confusing. I was very disappointed and, again, thinking this wasn't the space for me. So I actively tried to create these spaces for myself and for others that felt the same as me, (and) while I was there I actually kind of sourced all the Black female painters or artists within UAL (University of the Arts London).

**LA:** I think about decolonisation firstly on an individual level. It's definitely about breaking that cycle of forgetting. The cycle of forgetting is one of the most frustrating things I've encountered when excavating the history of radical education and exhibition-making by Black artists and professionals. Every year I talk to new students about this rich history, and they are amazed by it. It's about doing the work to own the history that exists and sharing that with other people. I think you have to be the source of your own decolonisation and you have to spread that within your social networks, for the community that you care for. On an institutional level, I think decolonisation is about being aware – or beware! – of the institution, because this is where colonisation really takes root. Sometimes, so-called projects of decolonisation are (really) just trying to maintain things as they are, trying to constrain the possibilities of a decolonisation agenda. We've seen that with artists and educators like Evan Ifekoya, who, despite (their) attempts to transform conversations around our work, are just met with this fog of gaslight by these institutions. It's hard work. I don't think there's any way of getting around the fact that it's a responsibility, and it requires bravery and definitely a level of discomfort. We need new institutional models – platforms like yours, B! (We need) an authority voice on the best contemporary art practice that exists right now in the UK.

**AS:** For me, I definitely think it's exciting (and) hopeful that there are other platforms being leveraged by people who are Black and brown to educate. (But) I think there is also an institutional responsibility that needs to be addressed when it comes



to decolonisation in academic institutions, especially, because the word is thrown around but no one's actually doing the work or unpacking what it means. That's my biggest gripe: how are you going to actually put your money where your mouth is and put things in place that will truly decolonise, as opposed to using it as a buzzword? Coming from the States and teaching courses, it was difficult to even find artists that checked off different boxes. And what I mean by that is finding queer brown artists who fit a particular theme we were focusing on, because the algorithm means the same artists keep getting recycled. When I Google collage artists, it's (always people like) Romare Bearden (that come up)... The problem is deeper than just 'we need to put the work in' because we can try until we're blue in the face to find artists who are not white, or cis, het men – and it's even harder because they're not highlighted or illuminated for us. They are still rendered invisible.

**LA:** Do you actually think the institution can survive decolonisation? That's the thing.

**AS:** No. Does it want to?

**LA:** I think decolonisation poses an existential threat to the very ideas of these institutions. The British Museum – how will they transform that organisation?

**AS:** Look at how long it took Nancy Spector to step down from the Guggenheim, why was she there for 25 years? (*Spector left her position as Guggenheim director and chief curator in October amid claims of racial discrimination.*)

**BT:** What was really interesting about her departure is that in the Guggenheim's statement they implied that (Spector) didn't step down due to reports of racial discrimination made against her by Chaédria LaBouvier, the first Black woman to curate a show (at the museum). They hired a law firm to investigate LaBouvier's claims, but they found that Chaédria didn't face racial discrimination even though the museum's curatorial staff signed an open letter about the white supremacist working environment, and she was still being gaslit even after Nancy stepped down. The institution still wanted to protect itself. I'm really resonating with what Lisa just said about the institution surviving decolonisation. What would an institution look like if it did survive? What kind of transformations would there be within that space?



Bolanle Tajudeen

## “Black art history is just *not* happening at all in schools” – Bolanle Tajudeen

**LA:** It would have to be a thorough cultural transformation. The very values that these institutions are built on would have to be rewritten. Looked at honestly. They would have to stand on the precipice of the cliff and say we're willing to fall into the unknown and fly up, to find a new way to do this work (with) completely different leadership.

**AS:** That's the thing – it's the leadership but it's even more than the leadership, it's the board. No one taught us about the board.

**LA:** It's the governors!

**AS:** It's the governing bodies that actually dictate (the agenda).

**AH:** Exactly, without getting into the boards we're not going to make a difference, and I'd like to pose the question, do you believe, do you truly believe that we can (make this) change? That we are going to pull down the institution?

**AS:** You know what? I believe, and actually it was like a reckoning to me in the midst of Covid and all this stuff that was happening. (Because) I may not – and my children and my future children may not – be alive to see that, but it's going to happen at some point. I think about the civil rights movement and my parents who lived through that, but they didn't know that the change was actually going to come when they were still alive. That's something we have to hold on to, (the fact) that it's not about us, it's not that individualistic. It's about the future, a future that we may not even get to witness.

**LA:** One of my dreams is to be around for a truly inclusive educational system that includes all histories, where my child doesn't

have to go and learn about the flipping Tudors, (or) some narrow, forced version of how we got to be the way we are. That really excites me. This is the Blackest Black History Month I have experienced – I've got a notification from Boots in my email about Black History Month, what is this? This is happening.

**AH:** Yeah, but I work in a school where for the first time we have not done Black History Month this year.

**LA:** Really?

**AH:** They're not doing it because they claim they're too busy with Covid. And that for me is shocking. Personally I can't stand Black History Month; I think (Black History) should be part of the curriculum and that's something I have championed and done debates in my school about. But if I don't get it in the curriculum then at least I want to *have* Black History Month. Let's not take it all away!

**BT:** (Like) Black history, art in schools is a very marginalised subject – put the two together and Black art history is just *not* happening at all in schools. The marginalisation of how Black students in creative subjects feel before they even get to university is quite harrowing. I get scared about the word decolonisation because then I start to think about the word 'diversity', and that's a word that I don't really fuck with, because I don't know what it means to say, 'Oh, we've got to have a diversity panel' – what does that mean? If I spend all my time talking about diversity, I don't talk about the art; I don't talk about the practice and I don't talk about what it is that I want to bring to the table.

**LA:** Maybe it's because I'm not part of an institution, but this is why I'm more interested in (how) creating radical organisations can be an example of radical practice.

**AS:** Yes, (but) I do worry about the sustainability of (such) organisations because they don't have the financial support that's necessary.

**BT:** I can talk about that from my perspective from running the Black Blossoms School of Art and Culture. It's easy to throw up courses on a website and say yeah, these courses are going to happen every week – but the admin that goes into that, there's just so many steps,

## “For me this is a time to be fearless. I feel totally charged by this moment; I've seen it come to fruition” – Lisa Anderson

and if I was working in a university running a department I would have an assistant. Also, I think about (what I would do) if I wanted to do something else. Am I just going to close down this school? I really, really think about the fact that this would create another gap and (the school would become) another one of these institutions that people are going to be learning about. And people will be like, 'Yeah, Black institutions never last.' I mean, the school definitely needs a board so some of you are going to be getting a little phone call soon! But then it's just putting Black and brown faces within those same (board) structures. Is that decolonisation? Annis and Shannon, I'm going to direct this question to you: in what way could the art world be easier for you to navigate? In what way can we make sure that Black women in the arts survive and thrive?

**SB:** Well, we very seldom come from backgrounds where there is money, so we're always having to do a job alongside our practice – but that's most artists, I would say. Things like having residencies that aren't too short (can help), because it takes a bit of time to settle into your space and get your practice going again. As an artist the thing I lack the most is time to practise. Writing proposals to get funding is, like, a big hoo-ha for me, I dread it! So workshops in how to write proposals and stuff like that would be good.

**AH:** I definitely think that community (is key). I know the BetterShared network have a community, because even though you can be talented and work hard, (a lot) is definitely based on who you know and who can put you in different positions and things like that.

**LA:** Apart from creating an environment of recognition for your work, I've been surprised to see how many non-white people are joining Black British Art as audience members. I also think that, structurally, I would love to see more mentorships and more inter-generational connections that (help to) open up doors.

**BT:** If you could give advice to give to a young Black girl seeking those relationships, what would it be?

**LA:** I would say, do your research! Don't be lazy and expect everybody to feed you with information. Do as much work as you can to get an understanding of the history, because the information is out there in a way that it's never been out there before. There are plenty of books you can read to get (familiar) with the key names of artists, what they've done, the networks they've created. Do your homework and then, when you make the approach, come at it with something to give, not just to receive. People want to invest in people but they also want to receive something. And just believe in yourself. Everybody was at the beginning at some point, so don't discount yourself with that whole syndrome that's like, 'I'm not supposed to be here...'

**BT:** Impostor syndrome.

**LA:** Impostor syndrome, bun impostor syndrome. Bun that!

**SB:** I think maybe tutorial sessions where you discuss where you're lacking in certain areas would be great. Because I do feel like a lot of the time as an emerging artist I'm learning as I go. For example,

when it comes to being represented by a gallery, how does this benefit you as an artist? What do you get out of it? Who to look at? I think that would definitely help.

**AH:** And you've got to recognise that it's about sticking at the game. Most people don't get recognised immediately. You do hear about people who came out of art college and suddenly someone bought their work and then... but, most artists, that's not how it works. You have show after show where you're not necessarily selling your work, but you need to find somewhere to store it because later on it might be that people come back and want the work!

**BT:** Let's talk about our ways of seeing as Black women. One (way of looking at this) is Black feminist ways of seeing. This is such an exciting time for Black women artists, the way my inbox is flooded with requests, the way I know a lot of Black artists, woman artists, queer artists who are constantly being commissioned at the moment. Simone Leigh, Lubaina Himid, Sonia Boyce, who is the first Black woman to represent the UK at the Venice Biennale. I think about the Harlem Renaissance, the BLK Art Group of the 80s in Britain, the Where We At group in the US. I think about all this and I feel like I'm part of one of these movements right now. The gravitas that is going to have in the future is unknown, but I know it's a very special moment we're living in. What does being here (in this moment) as artists, activists curators, art dealers, mean? What do you take from this moment?

**LA:** For me this is a time to be fearless. I feel totally charged by this moment; I've seen it come to fruition. I remember when things weren't like this, but there has been a steady chipping away at the old guard over the last ten years. With Sonia Boyce's Black Artists & Modernism project, with *The Place is Here* exhibition coming from Nottingham down to South London Gallery, with more curators of colour (like) Osei Bonsu and Zoé Whitley, (who recently took) charge at Chisenhale. So many things have happened. Even just zoning in on Lynette Yiadom-Boakye's career, in terms of art sales she's way up there in terms of the UK's representation of fine art in painting. She's up there with Chris Ofili. So I think we are most definitely in the midst of a renaissance.

**AS:** It's empowering. It's so easy to sort of feel, you know, lost and hopeless about things when our lives aren't respected or don't seem to matter to the rest of the world.

**BT:** Also I just want to highlight – Alexandria, you are the first Black woman professor of the RCA Painting School, so you also have the title of 'first', you know!

**AS:** Which is crazy in 2020! I didn't actually know that until I arrived, I didn't know that I was the first Black woman in the role of a head of the department, or even in a full-time position. It's surreal. I feel frustrated that we're celebrating firsts at this point in time, but also empowered. Impostor syndrome sets in so much sometimes that you forget you actually are motivating others, too. Your visibility just has so much magnitude.

**BT:** Annis, in your position, as you mentioned earlier, you're the only Black teacher in your school – how do you balance the hyper-visibility against the invisibility?

**AH:** Well, it's difficult sometimes, but I think I make a big difference to my students and that fills me with joy. It would have been fantastic (to have a Black teacher) growing up and at CSM, but there are things that you're going to have to protect yourself from a bit as well. You can't carry the baton for everything.

**SB:** When I was studying my MA at CSM I was the only Black student. I felt a little bit uncomfortable in that space so I just for some reason didn't think I was the sort of person to be a teacher. But then (it) just came naturally: I'm going to be the class rep,



I'm going to be the course rep, I'm going to create these spaces. I pulled from different Black female artists and educators within CSM and UAL, and brought them together to have this conversation about why their presence is so important.

**BT:** How do we take on this extra emotional load? We always become the 'voice', don't we, of racial and social justice in all its forms, but we're never the ones who are hired to be the diversity officers.

**AH:** I think I realised as I got older that just because you're outspoken you shouldn't have to be the only one that always does that job. You also need to make sure that you're progressing within your practice as well, and that you don't pay the price for taking on that fight for everybody. I think we all need to remember that we do need to look after ourselves, and not always be the ones that fight for everybody.

**BT:** I haven't really (developed) this theory in my head, I just know it sounds really good: Black feminist ways of seeing. Where does your seeing and being seen start from?

**AH:** The Black woman's body has always been seen as being at the bottom of the pile, or eroticised. I want to do these portraits at the moment of the women I know – and those are women who are mothers but also midwives, art curators, headteachers – (where) I'm looking at them with total respect and put them in a position (where) we're looking at them and we're celebrating them. I guess without really being conscious of it, that's the way I want to put the female body within my paintings, because that's how I feel about the women around me. I have the utmost respect for what they are contributing and I really want to celebrate them, and I want the rest of the world to see them through the same eyes that I see them.

## “It's not about us, it's not that individualistic. It's about the future, a future we may not even get to witness” – Alexandria Smith

**SB:** In my work, as well, that's something I like to think about – Black female ways of seeing. I always reference bell hooks' (idea of) the oppositional gaze, which is a critical way of looking at women of colour, and Black women, in film. But I've put it in the context of artworks and how I share stories within my own practice, so the gaze is something that's very important in my works. I always make sure that the figure – which is usually myself – is looking at the audience. Afrofemcentrism is (the idea of how) Black women depict Black women, and how that's important. Sometimes I find it a bit weird when white artists paint exclusively Black bodies, Black female bodies – I don't know, it's just something that's a bit strange to me. I definitely like to focus on looking, and I (admire) artists like Zanele Muholi and Mickalene Thomas – they use the gaze to really pierce the audience and create this archive of different Black (womxn's) experiences that's not monolithic.

**LA:** I place my feminism more in a basic commitment to justice and equality and personal liberation. I really connect to the power of recognising my matrilineal inheritance – the lineage that I come from, and the responsibility that gives me to lead and transform and live the fullest life possible not only for me, but for other people.

**BT:** When I think about the theory of matrilineal lineage I think about (Alice Walker's) *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens*, and also Marcia Michael's *The Object of My Gaze*, a multidisciplinary series that explores the visual act of Black matrilineage. Black feminist ways of being and seeing are within us; they're instinctively within us.

**LA:** That's what I'm saying, it's almost spiritual for me.

**BT:** When I spoke to Marcia Michael about her work she actually said that, as Black women – because of the fact that so few of us get to become doctors or professors – our own lived experience is theory. What we say is a theory to live by, it's just that it's not peer-reviewed. I'm very happy to go with that because, if we are talking about

decolonising the arts and education, I can't rely on getting published in a journal for my truth to be seen as reality. We kind of touched on the art market a little bit. I've had (the same) conversation with Black artists who are selling their artwork, and they're like, 'Bolanle, in my studio all these white collectors come, there are no Black collectors. I feel bad because I've got to eat, but my artwork is not staying in Black hands.' I see Shannon laughing!

**LA:** Right! How do we make Black art more accessible to Black collectors? Or, how do we democratise access to artworks from African diaspora artists? Because it is an exclusive, elitist and somewhat daunting area to get into if you don't have somebody guiding you through it, if you're coming at it new. It can feel like there's a really high-cost entry into this world and, yeah, if you go into your average private view you may feel like the only one there unless it's a particular type of art exhibition curated by a Black curator or something.

**AS:** This is what I share with students, with other younger artists who look to me as a mentor – you try to have different price points for your work, and you let people know that no one is expecting you to be able to buy the work in a lump sum. A lump sum is great for us: we want to just be given thousands and thousands of dollars for one painting, but if you really, truly are committed to people who look like you owning your work you need to find ways to make sure it's more accessible – (maybe) that means you have prints, limited-edition prints. (That could mean) you embellish some prints, make drawings, make works of a smaller scale to make it more accessible. I (also) have payment plans. I have tiered payment plans for people who are interested. It's really about your comfort level, but you never just give the work first, because you're not an institution. You get everything in writing. You send invoices.

There are ways to make sure everyone is protected and it's an investment, and someone has to understand that if you are making good on those payments they are going to make good on giving you the work. You never hear of artists not giving the work, (it's always) people taking the work and running and not paying!

**LA:** I agree wholly. Also, you can band together (as a network). There are so many community groups in the States that buy works together, they all chip in and do it for the community and (that is) something I would absolutely love to see here.

**BT:** We've covered mental health, we've covered collection, we've covered education, we've covered Black art history. We've covered so much and I feel very happy to have had this conversation with you all. It's literally a (glimpse) into the Art in the Age of Black Girl Magic WhatsApp group!



Azarra Amoy

PREVIOUS SPREAD, left: Bolanle wears printed velvet coat Gucci, wool flannel top and trousers Stella McCartney. THIS PAGE: Azarra wears cotton silk fringed dress Bottega Veneta, wool top Dior, handcrafted bronze earrings Alighieri, pointed leather shoes Jil Sander by Lucie and Luke Meier

“Having Black women in all areas of the art world will encourage more open conversations and support for artists just to be artists. I feel like I'm always expected to create work around my Blackness, or put in a box of 'Black artist'. Black Blossoms has provided a safe space for me as a Black woman to be vulnerable, while learning and breaking down programmed thoughts which have been taught to us in arts and educational institutions.”





Emily Moore

THIS PAGE: Emily wears knitted dress and pointed leather shoes *Jil Sander by Lucie and Luke Meier*, trousers her own, handcrafted bronze earrings and silver bracelet *Alighieri*. OPPOSITE PAGE: Emma wears gazar dress *Prada*, short-sleeved top *Gerbase*, printed top worn underneath *Chopova Lowena*, nylon zipper trousers *Woolrich*, printed neck-scarf *Dior*, shoes stylist's own

"I want to open and expand the conversation around contemporary painting through my position as an artist who is Black, British and female. Bolanle has opened doors so the world can see Black artists in their elevated position: the platform that is Black Blossoms is a powerhouse. It's potent."



Emma Prempeh

"While studying for my undergraduate degree, the representation of Black woman in these spaces was minimal if none. Having women who reflect me in higher positions of power has lasting impacts on the way I and many other Black women feel comfortable creating and navigating these spaces. The goal of my (own) practice is to explore the notion of distant memories, creating ubiquitous spaces that evoke a feeling of longing and safety."

Hair *Shamara Roper*, make-up *Danielle Kahlani* using *M.A.C.*, photographic assistant *Jessica Pierre Ross*, styling assistants *Sofiane Simayya*, *Lotta Bartha*, hair assistant *Shikisha Fraser*, special thanks *V.O Curations*