

# 'I used to think art could change the world'

## Lubaina Himid

1. Cut-outs from *Naming the Money*, 2004, Lubaina Himid (b. 1954), painted wood, various dimensions



**Together, the exhibitions at Spike Island, Bristol, Modern Art Oxford, and Nottingham Contemporary constitute your first major retrospective and include work from the last 30 years. How has your practice evolved in this time?**

I'm still as ambitious for the work, for what it might do and who it might speak to, as I was 30 years ago when I thought it could change the world. I understand now that it's capable of opening up conversations but that much of what I tried to change has remained the same.

I'm probably more experimental than when I started, when I might have conformed to the norms of painting on canvas or on paper. In recent years, I've painted on found ceramics, on newspapers, on planks

of wood, on farm carts. I experiment more with what a painting is or can be.

**The exhibition at Spike Island [20 January–26 March] features your installation *Naming the Money* [2004; Fig. 1], a pivotal work in your career. Can you talk about what this work means and how it functions in this specific setting?**

This is only the second time I've shown all of the work's 100 life-size wooden cut-out figures of African slaves. At Spike Island, it will feel like you're walking amongst the figures. Historically, black servants were signifiers of wealth; European portraits of wealthy families or individuals, particularly in the 18th and 19th centuries, often feature black servants

at the margins of the frame. In my installation, you're surrounded by all the slaves of Europe talking to each other. In a British setting, especially outside London and in an art gallery, it's unusual to be in a space with 100 black people.

It's great to experiment with the work's display at Spike Island; it speaks to the space, which was once a tea factory, as well as to the city of Bristol itself – with its history of wealth accumulated by the slave trade. Hopefully visitors will engage with the piece on a personal level.

**You're known primarily as a painter, and in the past you've been described as a history painter. Do you think of yourself in such terms?**