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REVIEW

Ingrid Pollard: Carbon Slowly Turning, review: the power's in the message

★★★★☆ 3/5

Shortlisted for this year's Turner Prize, Pollard's show at Turner Contemporary, Margate is impossible not to respect, maybe harder to love

By Alastair Sooke, CHIEF ART CRITIC
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Ingrid Pollard's Demo Frieze (2019) | CREDIT: Courtesy of the Artist

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Inside the first gallery of Ingrid Pollard's new exhibition at Turner Contemporary in Margate, three unruly kinetic sculptures are going berserk. Seemingly cobbled together, in collaboration with the artist Oliver Smart, from old bicycle parts and tools, like the illegitimate offspring of something by the Swiss sculptor Jean Tinguely, they thrash about while making a godawful racket.

According to a label, though, they're not flailing but bowing and curtsying. Two rusty crosscut saws repeatedly prostrate themselves. A black baseball bat waggles as if waving regally. There's something threatening about these bizarre, misshapen sculptures, which connect the history of English etiquette and good manners with a sense of coercion and violence. If we don't bow back, is that bat going to beat us up? Nearby, a frieze of synthetic-fabric banners, featuring imagery of protesters at demonstrations being manhandled by police, suggests what could happen.

Much of Pollard's work has a violent edge like this – and almost all of it dramatises questions that now consume us as a society, concerning racial identity and belonging. Born in Guyana, then a British colony, in 1953, she grew up in north London before emerging in the Eighties (a potent decade for black art in this country) as part of a feminist printmaking and photography collective. Although it isn't chronological, the Margate show contains several of the early photographic series for which she's known, such as DENY: IMAGINE: ATTACK (1991), which juxtaposes intimate black-and-white photographs with handwritten words, in the manner of a lovesick teenager embellishing a valentine – except that the language (“dyke”, “manhater”, “bulldagger”, and so on) is brutally homophobic, documenting the bigotry faced by black lesbians at the time.

The Cost of the English Landscape (1989), which adopts a similar approach, contrasts snaps of a black woman hiking through the Lake District with forbidding signs in block capitals (“No Trespass”, “Private Property”, “Keep Out”). Clearly, Pollard, who lives today in Northumberland, loves the countryside, and operates within the long tradition of English pastoral: throughout the exhibition, images of, say, blossoming trees, hardy Herdwick sheep, and beautiful drystone walls bespeak her lyrical regard for landscape.

At the same time, she suggests, this land hasn't been equally “green and pleasant” for everyone who's crossed it. For instance, another photographic series, from 2002 – one of several works with a seaside theme appropriately grouped together, given the gallery's setting – was sparked by Pollard's discovery of a grave of an 18th-century enslaved boy known as “Sambo”. He was buried at a Lancashire port that profited from the slave trade. It's easy to romanticise “this scepter'd isle”, but, Pollard reminds us, our national history is vexed. Her view of the British landscape encompasses barbed wire as well as natural beauty.



Ingrid Pollard's The Valentine Days #5. Crossing A River, J.V. 13950 (2017) | CREDIT: Courtesy of Ingrid Pollard/The Caribbean Photo Archive

Pollard has been shortlisted for this year's Turner Prize on the back of Carbon Slowly Turning, the first overview of her 40-year career, which initially appeared, in a slightly different guise, at the MK Gallery in Milton Keynes. It's easy to understand why: her work comments upon various issues that have only increased in intensity following Black Lives Matter. Recognition for Pollard is undoubtedly overdue. Better late than never, I guess.

Yet, while I respect her work's content and commitment, my applause remains dutiful. This isn't a thin show, and there's plenty to engage with. But the interest of Pollard's art is mostly its message: retelling, for instance, the age-old story of British landscape painting from the perspective of a contemporary black woman. The way she imparts this message, however, can feel uninspired, even obvious. In one piece, for instance, Wordsworth's famous lines about “golden daffodils” are graphically distorted, like a radio signal plagued by interference: the canon, disrupted.

I wish there'd been more moments of originality and delight, in the manner of, say, a suite of large paintings on view downstairs in the foyer by the German-born painter Sophie von Hellermann. Despite addressing similarly upsetting subject matter, in one case depicting asylum seekers in a tiny inflatable dinghy, they have a beguiling strangeness, and carefree execution, that, stylistically, is all their own.

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