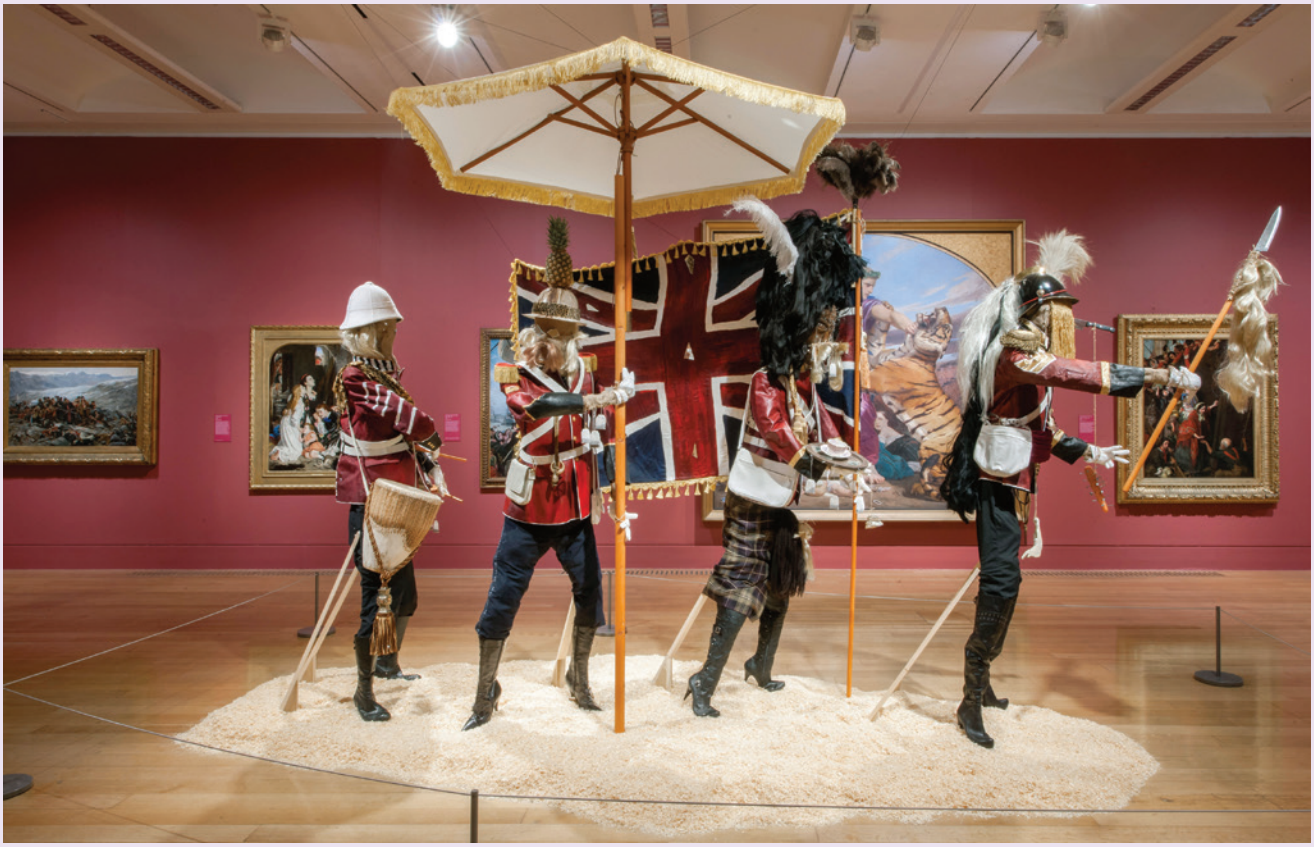
Empire of Whom?

BY ANNIE JAEL KWAN

How Tate Britain's history of the British Empire marginalized perspectives of the colonized



ANDREW GILBERT, *British Infantry Advance on Jerusalem, 4th of July, 1879*, 2015, mixed media, dimensions variable. Installed at the exhibition "Artist and Empire: Facing Britain's Imperial Past" at Tate Britain, London, 2015–16. Courtesy Jo Fernandes, Tate Photography.

The title of the Tate Britain exhibition "Artist and Empire: Facing Britain's Imperial Past" overstated the reach of the actual show. Held from November 2015 until April 2016 and curated by Alison Smith, David Blayney Brown, Carol Jacobi and Caroline Corbeau-Parsons, experts in British art from the late 18th century to the 20th century, "Artist and Empire" featured 200 selected objects, drawn exclusively from British collections, and spanning different historical genres such as maps, heroic paintings, collectibles, portraiture and the artworks made in response to the aftermath of empire. The curatorial description in the visitor's booklet invited the audience "to consider how [the artworks'] status and meaning change over time. In reflecting imperial narratives and postcolonial re-evaluations, [the exhibition] foregrounds the peoples, dramas and tragedies of Empire and their resonance in art today."

The numbers suggested otherwise. More than 50 percent of the works were by British artists (mainly English artists, with a few from Scotland and Ireland) or European artists working under commissions made by military, scientific or diplomatic expeditions, and by trading companies under the rubric of the empire. Twenty percent of the works focused mainly on the empire's encounters on the Indian continent, with another 25 percent related to the ex-colonies of Nigeria, New Zealand, Canada and Australia. A few represented the other former colonies and their artists. Considering that the British Empire included over 250 territories at its height, it is understandably impossible to represent them all. However, this suggests that the exhibition's treatise on "imperial narratives and postcolonial re-evaluations" was largely incomplete.

The absence of alternative and indigenous narratives from the many other colonies indicates that the exhibition's premise followed on the notion that the "British Empire" was directed by British interests, and hence, the narrative of empire should still revolve around its own central perspective. However, after more than 400 years, the empire has had long-lasting material effects on the lives of the formerly colonized populations and thus the term "British Empire" still resonates for all those disparate communities and nations. Were there not artists in those other ex-colonies? Do they not have a response to "Empire"? What does "facing Britain's imperial past" mean if its approach is only confronting a small portion of it? Does the Tate see itself, though positioned as a global brand and site for international visitors, as obligated only to represent a British-focused perspective? These questions were unfortunately not addressed either during the accompanying conference in November 2015, organized by Tate in collaboration with Birkbeck, University of London and King's College London.

Following the conference, Iniva, a London-based cultural institute that explores the politics of race and global

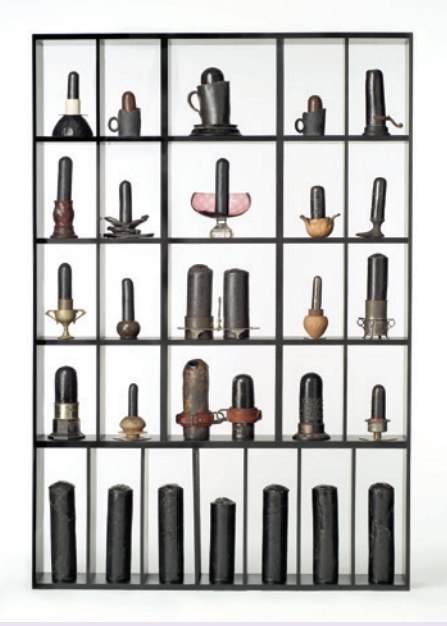
identities through the visual arts and cultural diversity in its programming, organized a feedback session to which I was invited as a respondent. Iniva director Melanie Keen participated on a panel at the "Artist and Empire" conference, and she obtained subsidies so a group of black and other minority art students and practitioners associated with Iniva could attend. This group was then invited to share their thoughts on the exhibition and conference.

In the discussion, the group collectively agreed that the gallery of "Imperial Heroics" as a whole was problematic from their perspective, due to the many paintings mythologizing British exploits and racist depictions of indigenous people. Two examples were cited by the group. Firstly, George William Joy's *The Death of General Gordon, Khartoum, 26th January, 1885* (1893) raised emotive responses from the group with its portrayal of General Gordon standing upright, calm and dignified while outnumbered as his attackers crawled up wildly toward him bearing spears. The image composition centered on Gordon as a heroic martyr, while the "natives" were portrayed as an unruly mob, with their backs showing. A similar exercise in mythmaking could be said of Robert Home's *The Reception of the Mysorean Hostage Princes by Marquis Cornwallis, 26 February 1792* (1793), a fictionalized and flattering account of what was essentially political hostage-taking of two young boys. As artist, curator and educator Barby Asante, who also facilitated the Iniva discussion, observed: "I was also struck by the naming of the artists (European artists) and the anonymity of the 'native' artworks, and how there was very little information about how these artworks were acquired. It felt very deliberate to shirk the issue of facing the British imperial past, and I felt that this was to slide the possibility of having an actual conversation about Tate and its own imperial legacy."

In a separate interview, artist Sonia Boyce remarked: "'Artist and Empire' continues a familiar trope of the subjugated black figure brought under control; made subordinate or subject to dominion; or rendered defeated and conquered—a position of victimhood in the face of power. This seems to be the main thesis for the exhibition."

In regard to these propagandistic paintings, I put forward that the Tate's convention of limiting wall texts to 100-word panels should have been extended to provide more contextualization alongside the display of these works, especially in view of their sensitive subject matter. Fortunately, the beautifully produced catalog, co-written by the Tate curators, provides more nuanced detail about the historical background and making of the works. For example, Alison Smith writes in the book about George William Joy's strong identification with General Gordon and his painstaking re-creation of the image based on accounts by other regiment men in a period where sensationalist journalism around Gordon's death marked him out as hero and saint, analysis that allows the reader to ascertain the eliding of mythmaking and art-making. Similarly, David Blayney Brown's text states: "Home's picture is just as flattering to the British, portraying Cornwallis and his officers as models of patrician benevolence in contrast to British propaganda that described Tipu as a savage oriental despot, the 'Tiger of Mysore' (in fact he was highly cultured)." But unfortunately, the catalog is available only to those with the means and sustained interest, and a browsing copy in the exhibition does not make it more accessible for a busy crowd to read, hence marking a critical difference between the information available to the many exhibition visitors and the proportionately fewer catalog-readers.

Where the curators used contemporary art to disrupt their own central narrative, it worked to only a limited extent. They invited young Scottish artist Andrew Gilbert to reassemble his installation *British Infantry Advance on Jerusalem, 4th of July, 1879* (2015) with its larger-than-life mannequins in military uniforms, alongside a fetishistic display of weapons and teacups in what was a satirical subversion of the ethnographic display. But while Gilbert's work served to thwart somewhat the gallery's central narrative of imperial heroics, the intervention only offered a counterpoint critique on the violent actions of the British imperial army, but did not shift attention onto the experiences of the indigenous people. It was still insufficient to unpack the disproportionately powerful paintings, especially when tackling the still-raw issues of racism and brutality associated with the British Empire.



DONALD LOCKE, *Trophies of Empire*, 1972–74, ceramic, wood, metal, glass and other materials, 190.5 x 129.5 x 20.3 cm. Copyright the artist's estate. Courtesy Tate, London.

Only in the last gallery, divided into two sections named "Out of Empire" and "Legacies of Empire," did the curators display modern and contemporary works by artists from former colonies including Australia, India, Nigeria, West Africa and British Guiana, as well as by British black and minority artists. Among them was Donald Locke's *Trophies of Empire* (1972–74), a cabinet installation with phallic, tubular sculptures—some linked by leg irons—that was especially striking since the Tate only acquired it in 2015, raising separate questions regarding the past canonization of British art and the institution's belated acquisition of certain artworks. Sonia Boyce's self-portrait *Lay Back, Keep Quiet and Think of What Makes Britain So Great* (1986) utilizes imperial language and imagery, set against a floral background reminiscent of Victorian wallpaper, to comment on the imperial values that still underlie self-identification. Hew Locke's photography of the statues of Edmund Burke (1729–1797) and Edward Colston (1636–1721), heaped with gold and shell necklaces, queries figures commemorated in history, and their ambivalent relationships with the economic prosperity during the time of the slave trade. These, together with the other works, offer some critique of the complexities of the empire and musings on the postcolonial condition.

For Asante, however, "Out of Empire" or "Legacies of Empire" was too little too late. As she explained: "That last room was not a sufficient antidote. The damage was done by the time you got to it . . . [the main narrative was still] centering themselves and centering culture around the West, and then classifying anything other as 'alternative.' . . . [T]hey repeat the colonial paternalistic narrative so anything other is presented as an aside."

With a subject matter as fractious as "Empire" and the postcolonial, it was troubling that less than 30 modern and contemporary works were included, most of which were confined in the last room. If space and budget were determining constraints, as explained by curator David Blayney Brown, then were there not other strategies of display, such as juxtaposing works throughout the six galleries, or including an online program or live performance that invited participatory responses to the British Empire? With the responsibility that comes with "facing Britain's imperial past" in the 21st century, the limitations of physical space and budget can hardly be convincing.

The second part of this essay, to appear in AAP 102, will explore how the exhibition is reworked at the National Gallery Singapore, when it tours there in October 2016.