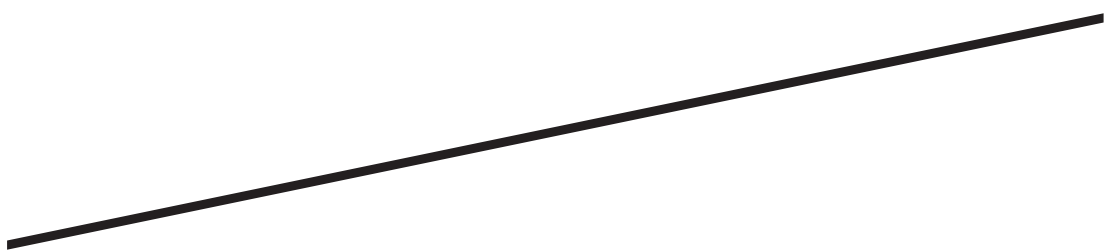




THE ARRIVANTS

An exhibition by Christine Checinska in partnership with the Visual Identities in Art and Design Research Centre



**CHRISTINE
CHECINSKA**





THE ARRIVANTS

30 July 2016 to 26 August 2016

FADA Gallery
University of Johannesburg

An exhibition by Christine Checinska in partnership with
the Visual Identities in Art and Design Research Centre,
University of Johannesburg



a boundary is not that at which something stops ...
[a] boundary is that from which something begins
its presencing.

(Martin Heidegger in Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1984)

The Arrivants

The genesis of *The Arrivants* stems back to 1998, when I was part of a creative writing group that was commemorating the 50th Anniversary of the arrival of the *Empire Windrush* in 1948. I found through the research that many of these Caribbean migrants, who came off the ship the *SS Windrush* at Tilbury Docks, had been housed in army tents on Clapham Common or else in Clapham South deep-level bomb shelter, unless they had somewhere else to stay.

I was working with the idea of visibility versus invisibility, and the suit as a kind of second skin and a way of expressing something about one's identity. I therefore went about sourcing suits from the late 1940s to early 1950s from thrift shops and flea markets around Clapham Common, and they all turned out to be grey pinstripe.

I was also looking at the work of the American photographer WeeGee, also known as Arthur (Usher) Fellig, and his iconic image, *The Line-Up* (1948), of 10-12 black men in a criminal line-up, which ironically was taken in the same year of the *SS Windrush* arriving to England. The idea of the criminal line-up is that the suspects are all meant to look similar. In this instance, however, these black men all looked very different – some short, some tall, some fat, some slim – but were perceived as similar, purely on the basis of their black skin. This is why they were in the same line-up and that really struck me. This developed into the idea of a collection of 10 grey suits, which at a glance looked exactly the same to me. Some suits were also double-breasted, with baggy trousers, sartorially marking that 1948 moment. One was styled as a zoot suit with a long silver watch chain, referencing Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* (1993) concept, where African-American cultural expressions like subcultural fashions connect to those of the wider global African diaspora.

This became *Ten Little Nigger Boys* - a body of work completed just before my PhD. The central feature of this installation piece consisted of the 10 men's grey pinstriped suits that I had customised – I had thought it interesting at the time, but these suits had then been stored in a suitcase in my study for eight to ten years, until I went to South Africa in 2015 for a residency visit with VIAD. I took one of the suits with me and used it then as part of the performance piece *Tidialectic Encounters* in response to the VIAD exhibition *Hypersampling Identities* (FADA Gallery, University of Johannesburg 2015). I realised then the resonance the work still had for me.

I was invited in 2016 to restage the elements from the original installation of *Ten Little Nigger Boys* in Johannesburg, and I thought this was a great opportunity as I could bring more of my research and findings into it, such as exploring male voices as well as bringing in a female perspective about arrival as well.

I wrestled with the change of the title of the piece in Johannesburg, from *Ten Little Nigger Boys* to *The Arrivants*, because 'nigger' is always a difficult word to engage with, and in a South African context, it was felt that it was a word that was too contested given the history of apartheid. My argument though is that it's always a difficult word and uncomfortable to read as such, and in the original install *Ten Little Nigger Boys* was unsettling, and unsettled me, even though the title was deliberately written in small text on the gallery wall and took some effort to read.

I eventually went with *The Arrivants* as I was reflecting on the *Picture Post* image in Johannesburg, as the first image that audiences would see coming downstairs to the exhibition, although I used the original title in the 'walk-about' gallery tour, and in the performance of *Back A Yard* with Michael.

I was concerned that by changing the exhibition's title from the original, some of the politics would be removed by sanitising it, particularly in light of my experience working in the fashion world as a designer, where fashion can be seen as a bit frothy and shallow. But in the installation, what I am talking about

(Front cover)
Christine Checinska
The Arrivants
2016
Suitcase and wooden packing cases with copy of *Picture Post* in the installation
FADA Gallery, Johannesburg
Courtesy of Thys Dullaart

(Inside front cover)
Christine Checinska
The Arrivants
2016
Detail from customised waistcoat displaying blackface Queen on clothes rack in the installation
FADA Gallery, Johannesburg
Courtesy of Thys Dullaart

Christine Checinska
The Arrivants
2016
Installation comprising projected images onto ten mounted grey men's pinstripe suits, archive items of clothing displayed amongst suitcases, trunks, wooden packing cases on recycled wooden pallets, soundscape via headphones on wooden chairs, and red faux-leather sofa on wooden pallet platform with vintage TV screening archive films
3.5 x 6 x 10 metres
FADA Gallery, Johannesburg
Courtesy of Thys Dullaart



I am the



(Previous spread)
Christine Checinska
The Arrivants
2016
Customised grey men's
pinstripe suits on
suspended mounts
in the installation
FADA Gallery,
Johannesburg
Courtesy of Thys Dullaart

(Top left)
Christine Checinska
Ten Little Nigger Boys
c2002
Courtesy of
Christine Checinska

(Bottom left)
Christine Checinska
Ten Little Nigger Boys
c2002
Courtesy of
Christine Checinska

and what I am interested in, is how culture, race and dress are related and provide a route into our somewhat fragmented histories. Dress, whether in the domestic space or on the body is a political act, because we as a nation were stripped, which is why we know the power of clothes; power that is rooted in the quest for personhood, humanity, and being seen as 'civilised': as people with history, with culture.

Reading Franz Fanon, I was struck by the colonisation of minds and how early that begins in the colonised and coloniser's thinking, which is why I originally used the nursery rhyme, *Ten Little Nigger Boys*, which inspired Agatha Christie's 1939 novel, *Ten Little Niggers*. As a nursery rhyme the title has been 'cleaned up', as it were, to *Ten Little Indians*. We only realised and recognised how racist these nursery rhymes were in later life, because they are singing about people that looked like me/us.

This also speaks to the imbalance of power in the art world. As an artist/curator/writer of colour, one has to navigate the colonisation of one's own mind as well as that of the minds of the art establishment. The issue is both one of perception and (mis)-representation; a blind-spot rooted in hierarchies of value based on race. That imbalance of power might mean having to change the title of work. Might that be indicative of how that artist is valued by the institution and/or themselves? I am not saying that this was the case in this instance, but there is sometimes a slippage between a gallery, museum, or university's invitation to an artist/curator/writer of colour to create a piece of work not simply discursively, but in practice. Both cultural and racial differences can present challenges. However, my sense is that these tensions can also enrich or finetune the work.

What is important to me is that in the UK the *Windrush* generation is often spoken of in romantic tones. Yet, my parents were part of this *Picture Post* generation who were represented in its pictorial essay, *Thirty Thousand Coloured Problems* in 1956, which was the year my dad came to England. Because of this, I always identified with the generation who were seen as a social problem. 10 years after they had arrived, it was realised that they were the people who were building the welfare state, and they weren't going home, because they were home, they were part of the Commonwealth and were not going anywhere else.

Therefore, it was important that the first thing audiences saw in my show was the Hulton Getty image from *Picture Post* in the disembarkation office at Southampton Docks, with piles of people and piles of luggage, but all elegantly dressed and striking poses even though they had probably been there for hours waiting – looking around and waiting on the brink of starting something new. They are aware that they were being gazed at and observed through the lens of the camera, so there is a performance in the poses that are being struck.

In *The Arrivants* installation the atmosphere of maritime arrival and departure of Southampton Docks was recreated, with platforms made from reclaimed wooden pallets, amongst stacks of suitcases or 'grips' as the *Windrush* generation called them, trunks and army kit bags, where items of clothing I had brought with me from the UK, and bales of Dutch wax print fabrics were housed.

Noël Coward signifies Englishness, Caribbeaness, Jamaicaness and issues of artifice (he is buried in the grounds of his former holiday home near Ocho Rios, Jamaica). His image in the installation was important because there is an artifice going on there. He presented himself as part of the English aristocracy, but he was also an interloper – an outsider, and therefore, spoke to me about the idea of these *Windrush* passengers staging a life or restaging a life in England. Crossing the border gave the opportunity to leave the past behind and become someone else, and the way that one dresses and carries oneself was all part of that re-invention for these relatively young people.

For the soundscape of the installation I created a 'mash up' of different

NOTTING HILL

• GATE W11

**ROYAL BOROUGH OF
KENSINGTON AND CHELSEA**



(Previous spread)
Christine Checinska
The Arrivants
2016
Detail from customised
grey men's pinstripe in
the installation
FADA Gallery,
Johannesburg
Courtesy of Thys Dullaart

Christine Checinska
The Arrivants
2016
Army knap-sack on
recycled wooden pallets
in the installation
FADA Gallery,
Johannesburg
Courtesy of Eugene Hön

music forms ranging from calypso, gospel and Blue Beat to Black British big band swing. One of the tracks was *Mad Dogs and Englishmen go out in the midday sun* (1931). In the extract from that song, Noël Coward is speaking in gobbledygook, which is meant to represent a kind of native 'creole' language. While this may be offensive to exhibition visitors, I liked that little detail, as it touches on the pre-conceptions about migrants and people other than the English.

Growing up under a colonial education system, Caribbean people didn't really know the details of their own history, since it was not considered to be of value by the colonial powers. Black Caribbeans were seen as history-less and culture-less. Everything that came from Britain was what one aspired to. These migrants would have known that Noël Coward song.

Looking at back copies of *The Jamaican Gleaner* from the 1940s and 1950s, I saw notices for the films that were being shown, the music being listened to, the recitals that were happening, and the concerts being played – so British and yet so little that was Caribbean.

There's a hyper-visibility surrounding the mass of immigrants portrayed as coming to ruin the country, where the individual gets lost, and that was important for me within the show. I found myself looking at the *Picture Post* image to see if there was anyone one might recognise – is my father one of those people? He was in Southampton Dock around the time the photograph was taken.

Individuality comes through in the way that a man styles his suit. This is possible not only in the cut, but through the details: the pocket handkerchief, the pens in the breast pocket, the badges stitched onto the lapel – it's all there to individuate and step away from the mass, as it were.

Working with the suits a second time round, it did seem more arduous to get them mounted, but what was interesting for me in the customisation of each suit was how each was developing its own character, such as 'King Tubby', the big guy with the cigar in a massive dark grey pinstripe suit, the 'pen-man' as a scribe, the 'preacher' with his bible and rosary beads. It was as though the suits became inhabited or embodied. This realisation came through the painstaking process of stitching and mounting these suits onto the wooden flats – not flush, but in a three-dimensional way that responded to the curve and arch of each imaginary body that in return responded to the character of each suit.

The flats were the size and scale of coffins, and painted in a battle ship grey colour, similar to the grey of government bureaucratic offices that the migrants would have seen at Southampton Docks when they disembarked from ships from the Caribbean.

We developed relationships with the imaginary men who might have inhabited these suits. I think this is why people were moved by the show overall, because they could identify with these imaginary men.

As an artist I draw on what I've read and researched, and so putting together the first install was intuitive. I then did the drilling down into the researching of oral testimonies. As a consequence, I think my own relationship to the suits changed, and consequently, I felt that it was important that they were humanised and further individuated.

In this iteration of *Ten Little Nigger Boys*, it was important to include those voices of the elders, and in working with VIAD Curatorial Team member, Maria Fidel Regueros (who helped facilitate that process) the oral testimonies really did speak to and animate the suits, which is possibly why it was more difficult to apply them in this second iteration.

It was strange working on the first iteration, because I remember setting it all up, standing back, switching on the music, and then welling up with tears. I've never understood why. I don't think I had realised what I was doing while I was doing it, and the power it had on me. Some people who



saw the show in Johannesburg came back upstairs crying, and I think it was because in animating and elevating the suits they became simultaneously humanised and iconised.

Including the female voice was also new. Maria encouraged me to do this, as she did with the inclusion of my own voice. In coming to Johannesburg, I literally tore pages from the notebook that I had started whilst in a creative writing group at the Mary Ward Centre, an independent Further Education college in London and threw them into my suitcase (I attended that group for a little over a year from 1998). When I read them in Johannesburg as part of preparing for the exhibition, I realised that there was another story to add to the narrative of disembarkation at Southampton Docks. That story came about through exploring my mum and dad's experience of growing up in Jamaica and then coming to England. One extract detailing the ritual of dressing, beginning with the donning of body-shaping foundation garments, was inspired by watching my mum getting dressed to attend PTA (Parents Teachers Association) meetings at my primary school in the 1970s.

I also brought with me a 1950s wedding dress, similar to my mum's, a day-dress, and a madras check shirt-waister dress from the same era. The wedding dress was draped inside a trunk, and the other items were folded and positioned inside the wooden crates. The story of my mum getting dressed with a panty girdle and conical bra became the imagined story of Bernice, who in getting dressed for her wedding day in Jamaica is comically squeezed into this under garment by her mother, before putting on the wedding dress. Developed from the notebook scraps I travelled with, the story ends in London, where she, Bernice, travels to reconnect with her husband, Samuel. In the exhibition, recordings of me reading these extracts emanated from the above displays via hidden speakers situated inside the trunk and the crates.

In this female story of arrival, I was also playing with Kobena Mercer's idea of pigmentocracy in the Caribbean, with Bernice being of a light-skinned complexion, and Samuel, dark skinned, though he is a school teacher. Bernice and Samuel meet in Jamaica, he travels to England to start making a life, and then sends for her. Britain is a shock for Bernice: the shock of arrival, the shock of Samuel – away from the warmth of the Caribbean where he would have been held up socially, in spite of the darkness of his skin. Bernice is in London, cold, Samuel stands in the open front door, and she is frightened, because Samuel is black. This throws her into a panic.

The story of Bernice and Samuel is part of a series of short stories that includes an entire family – beginning after Bernice has passed away, and with Samuel's remembrance of their wedding day. There is a son, and characters rather like the suits, such as a preacher, who is a charlatan. The short stories all inter-connect. It's wonderful rediscovering this material, as I had forgotten how much of my own voice is in my work, because the female voice is where the story began.

In terms of the literary references in the installation, they include an extract from Kamau Brathwaite's poetry collection, *The Arrivants* (1973), printed alongside the *Picture Post* image, in the entrance to the show, and text from Ralph Ellison's novel, *Invisible Man* (1952), rendered in vinyl lettering printed on the floor in a narrative flow. I read some poetry everyday. I like its openness that allows the mind to wonder, which, like *The Front Room*, invites a multi-vocality – many voices to come, consider and respond.

The space I used in the FADA gallery was entirely black, which I specifically wanted, like a photographic dark room or black box, rather than a white cube, where images could be projected onto the suits with focused spot-lighting, and the inserted backdrop soundscape. The 'black box' is also connected to memory, connected to history – a black box on a boat or plane records what was happening moments before a disaster. The effect was highly atmospheric, enabling a space in which people could contemplate.



(Previous spread)
Christine Checinska
The Arrivants
2016
Display on recycled
wooden pallets in
the installation
FADA Gallery,
Johannesburg
Courtesy of Eugene Hön

Christine Checinska
The Arrivants
2016
Handbag and scarf on suitcase
and suit in wooden packing
case on recycled wooden
pallets in the installation
FADA Gallery, Johannesburg
Courtesy of Eugene Hön

So you have seen them
with their cardboard grips,
felt hats, rain-cloaks, the women
with their plain
or purple-tinted
coats hiding their fatten-
ed hips.

(Edward Kamau Brathwaite, *The Arrivants*, 1967)



Christine Checinska
The Arrivants
2016
Quote from Edward Kamau Brathwaite's
collection of poems *The Arrivants: a new
world trilogy* rendered in vinyl wall print
in the installation
FADA Gallery, Johannesburg
Courtesy of Thys Dullaart

Christine Checinska
The Arrivants
2016
Quote from Ralph Ellison's novel
Invisible Man rendered in vinyl floor
print in the installation
FADA Gallery, Johannesburg
Courtesy of Eugene Höhn





(Previous page)
Christine Checinska
The Arrivants
2016
Wedding dress in
suitcase on recycled
wooden pallets in
the installation
FADA Gallery,
Johannesburg
Courtesy of Eugene Hön

(Top left)
Christine Checinska
The Arrivants
2016
Wooden chairs with
soundscape via
headphones *Man*
in the installation
FADA Gallery,
Johannesburg
Courtesy of Eugene Hön



(Bottom left)
Christine Checinska
The Arrivants
2016
Red faux-leather sofa
and armchair, TV monitor
in wooden cabinet, and
customised waistcoat on
clothes rack on recycled
wooden pallet platform
in the installation
FADA Gallery,
Johannesburg
Courtesy of Thys Dullaart

(Last page)
Christine Checinska
The Arrivants
2016
Christine Checinska
seated in red faux-leather
sofa in the installation
FADA Gallery,
Johannesburg
Courtesy of Eugene Hön

The small area on the raised platform in the exhibition provided a further contemplative space, with faux-leather seats where people could sit, surrounded by old packing cases and a vintage television set in a tall cabinet, screening extracts from the BBC2 documentary series, *Windrush* (1998), which featured the *Thirty Thousand Coloured Problems* (1956) image.

The Front Room and *The Arrivants* had a shared 'Caribbeaness' about them. The presence of the Queen in *The Front Room* was echoed by my own blackface Queen which was sewn into the inside of a waistcoat. Similarly, both installations made use of the juxtaposition of music as a signpost of creolisation; in *The Front Room* it was country & western like Jim Reeves; in *The Arrivants*, *Mad Dogs and Englishmen* and Black British swing tunes, calypso like Lord Kitchener, or a Blue Beat version of *Pack up your troubles in your old kit bag* (1915) (as many of the *Windrush* passengers were ex-service people coming out of the Second World War).

There is also the extraordinary creolised mix of images, music and styles that you get in the Caribbean homes we grew up in, which reminds me of Stuart Hall's essay 'Reconstruction work' (2000), where the diasporic gaze is hybridised – the same, but not quite – like the knight's move on the chess board – those unexpected twists to the side – like the blackface queen in *The Arrivants*, and in *The Front Room*, the starched multi-colour crochet or the Black South African beer making gourde.

As Black people, we are always on view. This comes through in the oral testimonies I did with the Caribbean elderly gentlemen. They were aware that they were invisible, but they were also aware that they weren't invisible or rather they were much more visible – on view – because of their skin colour.

One of the gentlemen chose a particular fabric, because he knew how it would hang with the colour of his skin against the light of the kerosene lamp back in the Caribbean. 'I know you're looking at me, and I'm going to give you something to look at!'

I found that in the focus groups with the elderly black gentlemen there was a certain competitiveness – such as, 'Now let me tell you' – in telling/teaching me as a black woman what it was like for them. As such, they shared more, with a wonderful one-up-man-ship.

The intimacy of the fabric they chose when visiting tailors; the whole process of having a suit made, which I suspect they wouldn't normally talk about, enabled me to extract their feminine side as men. There was a poetry in the lyricism of their Caribbeaness, like John la Rose, CLR James, or a Stuart Hall book you could take to bed and curl up with, because of the beautiful language he uses, just as in the way he speaks he carries you with him. As Ervin, one of the respondents, put it, 'Let me put it straight, dressing is like dancing, and you have to be good at both'.

It (African Diaspora dress) is like the diasporic gaze – to the left and to the right, and then something else. Once you hear the drum you can't get enough of it.

That picante
That little pepper
That little spice
A twist on something.

In the world in which I travel, I am endlessly recreating myself. And it is by going beyond the historical, instrumental hypothesis that I will initiate my cycle to freedom.

(Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, 1986)

