

Gallery One

How the West Was Won

1982

Acrylic paint on canvas

Tate: Presented by the Donald Rodney Estate 2007

The title of this work refers to the 1962 epic Western film of the same name. The painting depicts a pink-skinned man in black clothes and a hat, grinning while pointing a gun at another figure who is wearing a feathered headdress and an unhappy expression. The phrase 'THE ONLY GOOD INJUN IS A DEAD INJUN' curves around the body and hat of the gunman. As art historian

Eddie Chambers has argued, this work takes aim at 'Hollywood's "cowboys and Indians" films that tended to present Indian resistance to settler domination as the criminality of savages, for which ruthless suppression was the only fitting response'.

How the West was Won was made while Rodney was an undergraduate student at Trent Polytechnic (now Nottingham Trent University) in Nottingham. This is where Rodney first met artist Keith Piper, who became a close friend, and through whom he became involved in the activities of the BLK Art Group. In an interview for

Channel 4's 1987 series *State of the Art*, Rodney suggests that it was Piper's influence that steered him away from painting flowers and towards a more politically robust, 'Blacker' form of art practice.

Untitled Drawing

(Cowboy and Indian, after David Hockney's We

Two Boys Together Clinging 1961)

Pencil, charcoal and tape on paper

Wolverhampton Art Gallery

This large-scale pencil drawing is an homage to David Hockney's 1961 oil painting on board, *We Two Boys Together Clinging*. In Hockney's painting, made when he was a student at the Royal College of Art, the two figures are bound up in a loving embrace, with a strong sexual 'static' bridging their outlines.

In Rodney's version, the two figures are a cowboy and a Native American, and so the frisson of sexual desire is transformed into a threat of violence.

Britannia Hospital 3

1988

Oil pastel on x-ray Sheffield Museums

Britannia Hospital 3 is one of two surviving works from a trio of oil pastel paintings on x-rays that derive their titles from Lindsay Anderson's 1982 dark comedy film of the same name. Rodney was interested in how 'with x-rays you're looking beneath the surface to see what the structure of things really are'. And yet, more practically, constructing grids from x-rays was also a way for him to produce large-scale work despite his increasing immobility. The four central figures in the work are Rodney himself lying in bed, a

nurse, a figure based on Frida Kahlo's self-portrait *The Broken Column (La columna rota)* (1944), and a member of the police's then-notorious Special Patrol Group.

The House that Jack Built

1987

Mixed media Sheffield Museums

Described by the artist as a self-portrait, this mixed media installation features a crudely fashioned figure seated in front of a house made of x-rays of the artist's chest. From the late 1980s, Rodney made extensive use of medical x-rays in

his work, exploring the creative and metaphoric possibilities of the medium. In the catalogue for his solo exhibition *Critical* at Rochdale Art Gallery (1990), he described his need to pursue a media 'that is both rich in its allegory, deliberately visually provocative and holds an autobiographical thread throughout'. The curator of the exhibition, artist Lubaina Himid, at the time remarked that 'his x-ray pictures, eerie in their secret visual codes, overlaid with bright sharp strong realism, are the perfect metaphor... of Britain as a sick nation.'

Here the x-rays are painted, stencilled and cut out with text and silhouettes of hands and scissors.

The fragments of text narrate the enduring pathologies of colonialism and enslavement, often evoking the language of Pan- Africanism, a movement that sought unity between all peoples of African descent. The scarecrow-like figure, dressed in a striped cotton shirt and paint-splattered trousers stuffed with straw, carries echoes of histories of lynching. It has a tree-like structure sprouting from its neck, which Eddie Chambers has related to Frida Kahlo's painting *The*

Broken Column, a work that Rodney referenced more directly in *Britannia Hospital 3*.

A large print guide to the vitrines in this exhibition is available as a separate document from the wall by our reception desk.

Poster for *The Pan-Afrikan Connection* exhibition

1983

Paper

Courtesy of the collection of Keith Piper

Poster for the *Radical Black Art* convention

1984

Paper

Courtesy of the collection of Keith Piper

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Gallery Two

Mandingo

1990

Digital Giclée print on Hahnemühle photo rag

308gsm The Donald Rodney Estate

Black Sapphire

1990

Digital Giclée print on Hahnemühle photo rag

308gsm The Donald Rodney Estate

These works are both digital prints of original collages that Rodney made from the confines of his hospital bed, cutting up and recomposing the covers of books that locate erotic tales in times of plantation slavery. *Mandingo* is the title of a 1957 novel by American writer Kyle Onstott, while *Black Sapphire* refers to Leo Callan's 1980 pulp fiction.

Writing in his sketchbook the same year these works were made, Rodney notes: 'What I'm trying to define is how the dominant culture, white male

Christian western has throughout history found creative focus in restaging the past. [...] Books like *Mandingo, Master of Falconhurst* [also written by Onstott] and *Black Sapphire* [...] are all part of a particular genre dealing with the slave trade.

Those of us who have researched the slave trade will find little of any recognition within these novels. They are a type of fact/fiction utilising genuine history combined with an eroticised romanticism of that time. The books revolve around plantation life but usually have key characteristics that link them all. Black stereotypes of sexual omnipotence, graphic depictions of a

sadomasochistic nature, and the fear/thrill of
miscegenation.'

—

Cataract

1991

35mm slide installation The Donald Rodney Estate

This 35mm slide installation was first exhibited at

Camerawork gallery in London in 1991. Its

inclusion in *Visceral Canker* is the first time it has

been reconstructed for public viewing since. The

work comprises three unsynchronised slide

projections that produce overlapping images of the fragmented parts of four different Black male faces, including Rodney's own.

The resulting projection approximates police photo-fit images, similar to the found identikit image that forms part of *Self-Portrait: Black Men Public Enemy* (1990), which is also on view. As Rodney wrote in his original handwritten proposal for the Camerawork show:

'The attempt to produce a self-portrait when all Black images have been appropriated and put under clearly defined areas of political and

anthropological control has been a growing
preoccupation in my recent work.'

Untitled

1994

Collage

UK Government Art Collection

Untitled

1994

Paper, mixed media, magazines The Donald

Rodney Estate

A large print guide to the vitrines in this exhibition is available as a separate document from the wall by our reception desk.

Visceral Canker

1990

Wood panels, Perspex sheets, silicone tubing, blood bags and electrical pump

Tate: Presented by Tate Members 2009

This work was commissioned for the TSWA Four Cities Project in Plymouth. It was originally installed inside a former military battery at Mount

Edgcumbe in Cornwall, which overlooks Plymouth Sound.

It consists of two wooden plaques displaying different heraldic images, linked by a system of medical tubes and electrical pumps that circulate imitation blood. The blood connects the coat of arms of John Hawkins, the first slave trader to sail from Plymouth, to that of Queen Elizabeth I.

In 1567, Hawkins was granted the use of a large ship from Elizabeth's fleet, for the purpose of enslaving Africans to sell in the Spanish colonies.

Rodney had originally wanted to viscerally demonstrate his connection to the enslaved

people depicted on Hawkins' coat of arms by using his own blood, but Plymouth City Council intervened, and imitation blood was used instead.

The exhibition is titled after this piece because it exemplifies both the visceral nature of Rodney's work and his persistent scrutiny of the canker, or disease, at the heart of society: in this case specifically, how the inhumanity of Britain's colonial history continues to structure life today.

Self-Portrait: Black Men Public Enemy

1990

Lightboxes with Duratran prints

Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London

This work comprises five lightboxes containing

found images of Black men (none of whom are

Rodney) taken from the *Sunday Times*, the

Evening Standard, and a book on blood diseases.

Four of the images show subjects with black strips

placed across their eyes, while the lowest image is

an identikit style reconstruction. Media images of

Black masculinity were a central preoccupation for

Rodney throughout his career. As he said in 1995,

‘Black masculinity intrigues me because of being a

Black man and constantly being told that I am a threat.'

He also often pushed the boundaries of self-portraiture, either by not being present in the work, or by being present only obliquely. This is evident in several other works in the exhibition, from the fragmented x-rays that appear in *The House that Jack Built* (1987) to the autonomous wheelchair in *Psalms* (1997).

John Barnes

1991

Duratran print on aluminium framed lightbox with
fluorescent tube lights

The British Council Collection

Mexico Olympics

1991

Duratran print on aluminium framed lightbox with
fluorescent tube lights

The British Council Collection

These lightboxes display press photographs of
iconic moments when sport and the politics of
race have collided. In *Mexico Olympics*, US
athletes Tommie Smith and John Carlos perform a

Black Power salute from the podium at the 1968 Mexico Olympics.

In *John Barnes*, the British footballer is captured twenty years later backheeling a banana that racist fans have just thrown at him from off the pitch.

In both works, which are partly obscured by the mechanics of the lightboxes and Rodney's cropping (Smith's fist, for example, is cropped out of frame), the prejudices surrounding the media representation of Black sportsmen are laid bare.

Rodney originally created these works for his 1991 solo exhibition *Cataract* at Camerawork in

London, where they were shown alongside the 35mm slide installation of the same name, also on display in Gallery 2.

Gallery Three

Black Comedy 1

1997

Vinyl and paint on acrylic sheet

Tate: Presented by the executors of the Donald

Rodney Estate 2021

Black Comedy 2

1997

Vinyl and paint on acrylic sheet

Tate: Presented by the executors of the Donald

Rodney Estate 2021

In a text written with exhibition coordinator Jane

Bilton to accompany the exhibition *9 Night in*

Eldorado at South London Gallery, Rodney

describes these works as ‘two modernist

paintings, part of a genealogy of western art

history associated with white intellectual culture

and to which the contributions of other cultures

have largely been ignored.’

These paintings originate in a pair of earlier works titled *Cartoon 1* and *Cartoon 2* (both 1991), made for Rodney's exhibition *Cataract* at Camerawork in London in 1991. In these earlier pieces, Rodney appropriated cartoon imagery from *The Sun* newspaper, the outlines of which were cut in black vinyl and placed on Perspex. Both cartoons make a mockery of those who claim to have experienced racism. The first depicts a man in a turban and his family astride a tiger. As they march past immigration officers at Heathrow Airport, the man chuckles, 'I said we'd have no trouble getting through.' In the second cartoon, a

choir sings ‘I’m dreaming of a white Christmas’

while a barrister announces to a judge, ‘The

charge is racism, M’lud.’

In 1997, the *Cartoon* works were whitewashed in

a similar way to a billboard, with certain areas and

motifs painted black, to produce *Black Comedy 1*

and *Black Comedy 2*. Rodney describes them as

‘an ironic comment on the inherent racism in

white society and its revelation in both art and

popular culture.’

Sketchbooks

1986–95

Tate Archive: purchased from the executors of the
Donald Rodney Estate 2003

This display of 10 original sketchbooks demonstrates the integral role that drawing and writing played in the development of Rodney's work and thinking. They contain studies for new artworks, records of past exhibitions and various notes that reveal his shifting preoccupations over time. Though we are only able to display a small selection of pages from the sketchbooks here, the full archive is available on the Tate website.

A large print guide to the vitrines in this exhibition, including the vitrine of sketchbooks, is available separately from the wall beside our reception desk.

My Mother, My Father, My Sister, My Brother

1997

Human skin and pins

The Donald Rodney Estate. On long-term loan to

Amgueddfa Cymru – Museum Wales

My Mother, My Father, My Sister, My Brother is a

miniature house made of the artist's skin, taken

from his body after one of his many operations. It

was originally made for his 1997 exhibition *9 Night in Eldorado* at South London Gallery, which references the traditional Jamaican period of mourning following the death of a loved one. Together with the related photographic work, *In the House of My Father* (1997), this multi-layered sculpture evokes ideas of family, identity, belonging and home, but also has symbolic resonance on a wider social and political scale. Here, the protective tissue of the skin can be understood to mirror the protective mechanism of the family.

In an interview with the South London Press in September 1997, Rodney elaborated: 'It's about the fragility of the human body... and of the human ego... bodies can be suddenly broken down by just a few cells working the wrong way.' The very fragility of its structure, and the wider social structures for which it acts as a metaphor, lend the work a poignancy that exceeds its tiny proportions.

In the House of My Father

1997

Photograph

Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre, London

In the House of My Father is a close-up

photograph of the sculpture, *My Mother, My*

Father, My Sister, My Brother (1997), cradled in

the artist's outstretched hand. The image was

taken by photographer Andra Nelki during one of

Rodney's many stays at King's College Hospital in

London.

The work was originally conceived to be one of a

pair. Its unrealised companion would have

depicted the same work balanced on the artist's

tongue, alluding to the Christian ritual of communion. Here the symbolic and fragmented body of Christ is replaced by a tiny house constructed from the artist's own skin; though small and fragile, it too is symbolic of a series of wider bonds. The title of the work extends its metaphorical and religious resonances, evoking again the domestic space under the protective leadership of the father, as well as biblical references to a promised land.

Black Audio Film Collective

Three Songs on Pain, Time and Light

1995

Colour SD video with stereo sound, 25 mins

Lisson Gallery

This video portrait combines home movies, tableaux, and interviews to explore how Rodney negotiated life as an artist with sickle cell anaemia, and how his experiences of medicalisation informed the development of his work.

The Black Audio Film Collective was a group of seven artists and filmmakers active between 1982 and 1998, whose films, videos and tape-slide

installations engaged with Black political culture, the rhetoric of nationhood and race, and diasporic experience in Britain. Those affiliated with the group included John Akomfrah, Reece Auguiste, Edward George, Lina Gopaul, Avril Johnson, David Lawson and Trevor Mathison. Filmmaker John Akomfrah later went on to make *The Genome Chronicles* (2009), which combined his own footage of repeated trips to the Scottish islands of Skye and Mull with Rodney's own Super-8 film footage.

Flesh of My Flesh

1996

Photograph on aluminium

The South London Gallery collection, managed by Southwark Council as part of the Southwark Art Collection

During the mid to late 1990s, when Rodney's deteriorating health rendered him increasingly bedridden, he participated in several exhibitions that examined the relationship between art and science. This large-scale photographic triptych was commissioned for one such project, the group exhibition *Body Visual* at the Barbican Art Centre

(1996). Informed by conversations with medical consultants, Rodney used technologies of imaging and 'evidencing' to investigate the politics of sickle cell anaemia, unsettling mythologies of racial difference.

The central panel presents a tightly cropped, close-up view of a thick scar on the artist's thigh following his most recent hip operation. As artist Virginia Nimarkoh has pointed out, 'By medical standards, the scar was... evidence of malpractice: over-stitching by a reckless surgeon who apparently felt that Black skin required more work since it was "tougher" than White skin.' On either

side are images of a knot of human hairs: one belonging to Rodney, the other belonging to fellow artist Rose Finn- Kelcey. Photographed under an electron microscope, the visual difference between the hair of a Black male and a white female becomes virtually indistinguishable.

Autoicon

2000

Digital file, computer

The Donald Rodney Estate

Autoicon is another key example of Rodney's pioneering engagements with new technology,

initially developed in collaboration with Mike Phillips. Ever concerned with his own mortality, *Autoicon* was Rodney's attempt to create a kind of virtual self that would outlive him. It is an interactive internet work that exists as both a website and CD-ROM, and 'simulates both the physical presence and elements of the creative personality of the artist Donald Rodney', as the accompanying text describes. It goes on to explain: 'Users will encounter a "live" presence through a "body" of data (which refers to the mass of medical data produced on the human

body), be able to engage in simulated dialogue (derived from interviews and memories), and in turn affect an auto-generative montage machine that assembles images collected from the web (rather like a sketchbook of ideas in flux).’

Conceived in the mid-1990s but not completed until two years after his death, *Autoicon* was produced by Science Technology Arts Research (STAR) at the University of Plymouth and iniva, Institute of Visual Arts, alongside close friends Mike Phillips, Gary Stewart, Keith Piper and Diane Symons who worked under the name of Donald Rodney PLC.

Rodney came to rely on this group and others – including Jeremy Akerman, Eddie Chambers, Richard Hylton, Dave Lewis, Virginia Nimarkoh, Viv Reiss and various hospital staff – increasingly toward the end of his life, when debilitating bouts of illness forced him to delegate the organisation and production of his artwork. As Rodney said in the catalogue for his 1997 solo exhibition at South London Gallery: ‘I would like to thank “the usual suspects” for their friendship, generosity, personal and professional support in enabling me to work

under what has become normal rather than exceptional circumstances’.

Inspired by philosopher and economist Jeremy

Bentham’s *Auto-Icon*, which consists of his

preserved skeleton dressed in his own clothes,

Rodney’s *Autoicon* explores ideas of authorship

and the self, historicity and memory, and

personhood and corporeality.

You are invited to interact with this artwork. If you

would like more information, please ask a

member of staff.

Drawings on transparencies used to make
photographic prints for *Soweto/Guernica* and *The
Watchtower, Citizens Stand in British Standard
Time, An X-ray History, Monitor* and *X-ray Analysis*
1988

Wolverhampton Art Gallery

Preparatory drawings for *Soweto/Guernica* and
*The Watchtower, Citizens Stand in British Standard
Time, An X-ray History, Monitor* and *X-ray Analysis*
1988

Wolverhampton Art Gallery

These drawings were used by Rodney to make two large-scale works for *Crisis*, a solo exhibition at Graves Art Gallery in Sheffield and Chisenhale Gallery in London in 1988–89. They appear in the photographic prints at the top of *Soweto/Guernica*, and were projected, enlarged, and traced onto the x-rays in *The Watchtower*, *Citizens Stand in British Standard Time*, *An X-ray History*, *Monitor and X-ray Analysis* (both 1988). Writing about *Soweto/Guernica*, art historian Eddie Chambers notes: ‘Picasso’s monumental commentary on a particularly violent episode from the Spanish Civil War was used by Rodney to

illustrate a more recent episode of equal barbarity; the suppression by the South African state of black South Africans demonstrating against apartheid. The demonstrations were sparked by school children protesting against being taught Afrikaans, a language they perceived to be that of their oppressors. Rodney's *Soweto/Guernica* was, in essence, a composite of Picasso's painting and an equally iconic photograph by Sam Nzima, a South African photographer. Nzima's image was of the dead schoolboy, Hector Pieterse, the first casualty of a series of clashes in Soweto that began in June

1976 between black youths and the South African authorities.'

Images of *Soweto/Guernica* and *The Watchtower*, *Citizens Stand in British Standard Time*, *An X-ray History*, *Monitor* and *X-ray Analysis* are on display in the nearby vitrines.

A large print guide to the vitrines in this exhibition is available separately from the wall next to our reception desk.

Gallery Four

Psalms

1997

Interactive software, motorised wheelchair, laptop and sensors

Tate: Purchased with funds provided by Tate

International Council 2021

In the years leading up to his untimely death in 1998, Rodney explored digital and robotic technologies with his long-time friend and collaborator, Mike Phillips. *Psalms* was the result of one of their collaborations, produced for the exhibition *9 Night in Eldorado* at South London Gallery.

Psalms is a motorised wheelchair programmed to navigate the floor space of the gallery using proximity sensors to avoid obstacles. The press release for the South London Gallery exhibition describes the 'empty wheelchair cours[ing] through its various trajectories on a sad and lonely journey of life, a journey to nowhere. Its movements repeat like an ever-recurring memory, a memory of another life and another journey, that made by Rodney's father.' Rodney's father passed away in 1995, and had originally emigrated to the UK from Jamaica in the 1950s as part of the Windrush Generation. Rodney had been too ill to

attend his father's nine night, and this absence went on to shape much of his thinking for the exhibition. The wheelchair may also be understood as a proxy for the absent body of the artist, who was unable to attend the opening of his own exhibition due to his deteriorating health.

My Catechism

1997

20 plaster casts

Tate: Purchased 2005

My Catechism comprises plaster casts of the entire set of the *Children's Encyclopaedia*

Britannica. Made for *9 Night in Eldorado*, they were originally installed in a single line at the South London Gallery, perhaps a reference to the formal language of Minimalism. Like many of the other works produced for this exhibition, *My Catechism* proceeds from comforting memories of 'home'. As explained in the press release, the encyclopaedias were 'treated with reverence in the Rodney household [...] they were bought by Rodney's father from a door-to-door salesman and intended as the only books his young son would need in the land of opportunity.'

The title of the work refers to the manuals of religious instruction that expound the doctrine of the Catholic Church. The traditions and community of the Jamaican Pentecostal Church were central to the lives of Rodney's parents, and Rodney often employed the language of the church, and its attendant narratives of exile, belonging and ancestry, in his work.

Doublethink

1992

Trophies, engraved plaques The Donald Rodney

Estate

Rodney produced this work for the exhibition *Trophies of Empire* at Arnolfini in 1992. In the catalogue for the show, Rodney describes the concept of doublethink from George Orwell's novel *1984*: 'Doublethink means the power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one's mind simultaneously and accepting both of them.' Building on earlier works such as *John Barnes* and *Mexico Olympics* (both 1991), Rodney became fascinated with how doublethink plays out in the treatment of Black sportsmen, who often 'receive both cheers of appreciation and taunts of racial abuse'.

The work comprises over 70 sports trophies presented in cabinets, and has been reconstructed based on Rodney's original proposal using the trophies that were sourced for his survey exhibition *In Retrospect* at iniva in London in 2008.

Each trophy bears a label engraved with what Rodney describes as 'a maelstrom of white contradictions, half-truths and lies'. In an interview with BBC Radio 4 in 1992, Rodney makes it clear that the phrases are 'found' in the most depressing sense:

'These are all generalisations, which you hear constantly time and time and time again. You read

them in books, you read them in magazines, you
overhear them on
the tube, you overhear them on the bus, in the
paper shop, it's around you all the time, it's like
this constant white noise which you're having to
put up with, whilst you're desperately trying to do
what you do – like I'm trying to be an artist, John
Barnes is trying to be a good footballer, Mike
Tyson is trying to be a good boxer, each one of us
have our flaws but those flaws become a thing
which is noticed by a white community.'

A large print guide to this artwork is available to visitors with sight loss or visual impairment at reception on request.

Pygmalion

1996–97

Wood, textile, plastic, paint, resin and metal

Birmingham Museums Trust on behalf

of Birmingham City Council

In *Pygmalion*, Rodney transforms the figure of the

‘Laughing Policeman’, familiar from seaside

arcades and funfairs, into a macabre puppet

version of the pop singer Michael Jackson, complete with Jheri-curl wig, gold trimmed jacket and single silver glove. Rodney has applied a thick coat of black face paint to the mechanical figure, in an act that contravenes the visible whitening of Jackson's own skin. In highlighting Jackson's ambivalent status as a controversial pop culture icon, the work speaks to Rodney's long-standing interests in the construction of race and media representations of Black masculinity.

Donald Rodney speaking at Gillingham School,

Dorset

1992

Digitised VHS tape, 30 mins Collection of Ann

Symons

This video documents an occasion at which

Rodney was invited to speak about his work and

practice to sixth form students at Gillingham

School in Dorset.

BBC Scene West

1992

Digitised VHS tape, 5 mins

A video recording of Rodney's work *Doublethink*
(1992) in the exhibition *Trophies of Empire* (1992)
at Arnolfini in Bristol.