

Nottingham Contemporary
Teacher / Group Leader Notes

Donald Rodney: *Visceral Canker*
28 Sep 2024 – 5 Jan 2025

Featuring: Paintings, drawings, collage, installation, archives, sculpture, digital, animatronics.

Curriculum: Art & Design, PSHE, Citizenship, History.

Themes: Creative ingenuity and the use of sketchbooks, materials, and techniques to explore ideas. The pioneering use of technologies and programming in digital art. Social justice, Black masculinity, chronic illness, stereotypes, and media representations. Community, activism and art with social and political purpose. Colonial legacies and Britain in the 80s. Metaphor and symbolism.

Donald Rodney is an artist known for his **creative ingenuity** and **experimentation with materials and technologies**. This exhibition highlights the breadth of his work and brings together nearly all that survives. Here a small selection are highlighted.

Donald came to **Nottingham in the early 80's** to study at Trent Polytechnic (now Nottingham Trent University). Here, he formed important friendships that shaped his politics and art practice. Together with students from across the **Midlands** he formed a **movement that shaped art history, the BLK Art Group**.

Donald lived with **sickle cell anaemia**, and so experienced pain and fatigue, countless operations and increasing immobility. Donald incorporated these experiences into his work as **a metaphor for the illnesses and injustices in society**.

Visceral Canker taken from one of Donald's artworks is the title of the exhibition. It describes both the deeply felt visceral nature of his work and politics, and his persistent scrutiny of the canker, or disease, at the heart of society.



Donald Rodney, *Visceral Canker*, 1990 (detail).
©The Estate of Donald Rodney Collection Tate.

The artwork by the same name consists of two wooden plaques displaying the coats of arms of Sir John Hawkins and Queen Elizabeth I, linked by medical tubes and electrical pumps that circulate 'blood'. Hawkins was granted the use of a ship from Elizabeth's fleet for the trading of enslaved people. Donald originally intended to use his own blood in the work to show his connection to the history of enslaved people and to show that **Britain's colonial past** continues to structure life today. This artwork connects to **current debates around the legacies of Empire**, the Commonwealth and reparations.



Donald Rodney, *Britannia Hospital 3*, 1998. ©The Estate of Donald Rodney.
Collection of Sheffield Museums.

Donald often used X-ray images, including his own, in his work. Working on individual images, often with oil pastels from his hospital bed; he would then put pieces together to make large-scale work.

Donald selected materials and ways of working to help say what he wanted to say. Donald created works about **racism and the systems and structures that hold it in place**. He said, "with X-rays you're looking beneath the surface to see what the structure of things really are".

Britannia Hospital 3 features a female figure that references both Frida Kahlo's *The Broken Column*, another artist who experienced chronic pain, and Cherry Groce, a woman left paralysed after she was wrongfully shot by police. Additionally, the work includes an officer from the notorious Special Patrol Group. In the foreground we see Donald, with arms raised and a nurse.

The theme of police violence is also within the work *Soweto / Guernica*, based on the Soweto Uprising, 1976, when protesting students were attacked and a schoolboy killed. It is also a reference to Picasso's work on the horrors and suffering in war. Donald's artwork no longer exists, but in Gallery 3, you will find fragments, preparatory, annotated drawings (Cherry Groce and Colin Roach are noted here) and reference images, allowing us a glimpse into the **artist's processes**. Also on display are pages from 10 of Donald's **sketchbooks** – all 48 can be viewed online on Tate's website.

Donald also used **media images** and lightboxes. Two works, *John Barnes* and *Mexico Olympics*, feature images from sport when racism and defiance in the face of racism collide. Like x-rays, lightboxes allow us to see the mechanisms beneath.



Donald Rodney, *John Barnes*, 1991. ©The Estate of Donald Rodney. Photo © British Council Collection

Another lightbox work, entitled *Self Portrait: Black Men Public Enemy*, features images from a variety of sources, but does not include Donald's image. The work explores **how Black men are represented in society**. He said, 'Black masculinity intrigues me because of being a Black man and constantly being told that I am a threat.' Donald pushed the boundaries of self-portraiture by not being present or by being present only indirectly in the work.

Deeply harmful **racist stereotypes** are explored in the work *Doublethink*, a reference to Orwell's novel 1984, where the term doublethink is used to describe the ability to hold contradictory opinions at the same time. Here it references how Black sports stars are both celebrated and vilified. Donald presents 70 sporting trophies in display cabinets, each engraved with what Donald describes as 'a maelstrom of white contradictions, half-truths and lies'. He says, 'These are all generalisations, which you hear constantly time and time and time again.... 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.'



Donald Rodney, *In The House of My Father* (1997).
Photograph. Courtesy the Estate of Donald Rodney and the Arts Council Collection

Another artwork, *My Mother, My Father, My Sister, My Brother*, is a tiny house made from Donald's own skin. One artwork is the house itself, and alongside, a photograph of it cradled in his hand. It suggests family, home and protection, but also fragility. The **fragility of the body and the structures around us**.

In the years leading up to his untimely death in 1998, Donald explored digital and robotic technologies with his long-time friend and collaborator, Mike Phillips. One of their collaborations resulted in *Psalms*, a motorised, programmed wheelchair. The artwork makes us think of **absence** as it wanders sadly around the gallery. Made in response to Donald's feelings about his father's death, it also represents Donald himself, who was unable through illness to be at an exhibition this artwork was made for.



Donald Rodney, *Psalms* (1997). Courtesy the Estate of Donald Rodney and Tate.

Another artwork, based on Donald's ideas and made after his death is *Autoicon*. Donald knew that his time was limited, and so wanted to make a virtual version of himself that would outlive him. Conceived in the mid 90's and completed in 2000, the work is an example of Donald's **pioneering use of technologies**. The work allows visitors to have a 'conversation' with a virtual version of Donald. Donald leaves behind a body of work that continues to inspire generations of artists.