

## Stop 0 - Orientation

Nottingham Contemporary presents a major retrospective of the late British artist Donald Rodney. Bringing together nearly all that survives of his work across painting, drawing, installation, sculpture and digital media with rare archive materials, the exhibition highlights Rodney's significance to the recent history of British art. The exhibition is curated by Gasworks Director Robert Leckie and Spike Island Director Nicole Yip. It is presented in partnership with Spike Island and Whitechapel Gallery.

This guide is specifically written for and in collaboration with blind and visually impaired audience members through consultation with members of My Sight Nottinghamshire and SoundScribe. 8 artworks will be audio described but if you would like additional commentary on any other artworks please ask the invigilators positioned in each gallery.

The exhibition is spread across four galleries. There are 9 stops including the audio description credits and they each range from 2 to 5 minutes. We describe two artworks in each gallery. Please note that a 25 minute video plays on a loop in a darkened room within Gallery 3. Although this does not currently include audio description, the film is mostly a series of interviews with Donald Rodney and other artists overlaid with images of Donald's artworks.

We invite you to use your own devices to access the audio description and you can scan a Navilens code or QR code positioned at the entrance to Gallery 1. You can navigate between each stop on a playlist, so go at your own pace! Alternatively you can ask for audio description at the reception desk where you will receive an MP3 player fully loaded with our stops. The black device is smaller than a smartphone and can fit either inside your pocket or you can hook it onto your pocket using the clip at the back. A broad screen takes up the top two thirds of the device.

Directly below this is a button on the far left that takes you to the menu and on the far right is a back button. There is a wide, raised oval button at the centre which plays and pauses the tracks. It's surrounded by four direction buttons with bump-on stickers. A bump-on to the left of the central play button takes you to the previous track. A bump-on to the right takes you to the next track. On the right side of the device is a volume controller and a power on/off button beneath it.

Nottingham Contemporary is looking into tactile lines across all four galleries. Each gallery has a set of semi-automatic double doors which can be heavy and awkward to open. If you need any assistance there are gallery invigilators in each room. If you would like to be guided please ask at the reception desk.

On the [exhibition webpage](#) you can access other resources related to the show including a large print version of all wall text, exhibition notes, artwork labels, virtine labels and sketchbook labels, as well as the exhibition notes in Arabic, Urdu and Polish. They have also provided an Easy Read Exhibition Guide and audio recordings of all labels which include curatorial and historical context.

The exhibition is generously supported by the Weston Loan Programme with Art Fund, the Henry Moore Foundation, the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, the Pilgrim Trust & the Donald Rodney Exhibition Circle.

Your audio describer is Elaine Lillian Joseph from SoundScribe and this audio described guide will last approximately 35 minutes.

## Stop 1 - *How the West was Won*

In this almost square painting a violent encounter is happening between a white cowboy and a Native American in a desert. In the top left corner, the title in black uneven capitals reads 'How the West was Won'.

The painting (120 cm by 121 cm) is held within a black frame. Its black border has irregular intervals of white blobs that resemble the sprocket holes along the edge of a film reel as if this is a still from a movie. The scene is captured in bright, unglazed acrylic paint in flat, rough, childlike brushstrokes. The background is divided horizontally in two, the top half is a blue sky and lighter blue fluffy clouds and the bottom half is a parched yellow desert. A solitary palm tree stands slightly off centre to the right, its bushy crown of leaves touching the top edge of the painting.

A yellow sun blazes in the top left corner, directly over a pink-skinned cowboy, who's standing in profile, facing to the right. His black broad-brimmed cowboy hat mostly covers his blond hair. He's pictured from his head to his torso in a black shirt. His eye is solid demonic black, all pupil with no white and his pointy nose matches an equally pointy chin. A grotesque grin carves out most of his face, extending up past his eye and almost reaching the brim of his hat. His teeth, articulated by thick vertical black lines, give his silver tongue a barbed appearance. The silver tongue is unnaturally long and protrudes out of his mouth like a metal dagger with a pointed tip. Black text snakes along his back, up his neck and over his hat: "The only good injun is a dead injun". Indian is an offensive, derogatory term for a Native American person and is spelt i.n.j.u.n. giving a sense of the drawl of the cowboy's accent. In the cowboy's left hand is a tiny red plastic pistol which is attached to the painting creating a sudden 3D moment. The gun-toting cowboy is pointing his pistol at blank range, aimed at the Native American man's head.

He has dark brown skin and is only pictured from his head to his neck, making him appear much shorter than the cowboy. Four red-tipped white and grey feathers fan out across his short crop of black hair. He's facing straight ahead, towards us, but is staring sidelong, his eyes narrowed at the cowboy, his dark pupils smudged as if darting frantically. His downturned mouth hangs beyond his face in a fearful grimace.

The positioning of the subjects speaks of the power-play - the height of the white cowboy towering over the shorter Native American man, the sun blazing over the cowboy's head and his psychopathic grin which threatens to engulf his face.

Rodney has signed his full name in black text and added the date 27 September 1982 along the bottom edge of the painting. This is the end of stop 1.

## Stop 2 - *The House That Jack Built*

This stop vocalises racial slurs and culturally sensitive language depicted in textform in the piece.

A headless, life-sized 3D figure is centred in front of a collage of x-rays in the shape of a house. The collage dominates the white wall spanning 244 cm high and 244 cm wide and represents a flat, cross section of a house with a triangular roof and chimney. It's made up of sheets of chest x-rays, including some of Rodney's from his hospital visits, and they're lined up in mostly rectangular tiles to form the "bricks" of the house. It's seven x-rays across and six x-rays at its tallest point. Each one captures ribs, heart, and lungs in black and grey. The figure is wearing paint-splattered clothes and is seated in a rusty black chair a short distance in front of the house.

A tall chimney pot protrudes from the left side of the house's roof.

Slender silhouetted hands, encroach from the leftmost edge. Painted black they reach across an x-ray and point towards stencilled letters that form a long piece of text revealing the white wall behind it. It ends with: "I've been called many things, from nigger to negro, coon to colored, and from evil to ethnic type. My family tree has roots muscle deep and Jack's house is built on 75 million dead black souls." In the bottom left corner the words 'Self Portrait' title an image of his ribcage along with a subtitle: "With blak family tree and ancestral home".

On the right side of the house a flock of cut-out scissors congregate around a silhouette of a noose suspended from the roof on a chain. The scissors' blades are extended wide open as if they've freshly snipped out the next set of words: "I can hear the drums beat out S.O.S, save our shit, save our souls, save our struggle".

The headless figure in front of the house is seated on a wooden chair roughly painted black. The figure has no shoes and is wearing worn, khaki trousers draped over the chair's front legs. The right trouser leg has wooden supports that poke out at a slanted angle from the hem. It gives the illusion that there is an additional chair leg like two offshoots of the same branch.

If you were to view the figure side-on you would notice that the top of the trouser legs, where the thighs would be, are pinned to the chair seat with dozens of rusty nails. The frame of the chair is studded with spikes turning it into an instrument of torture. The figure's stomach is stuffed with straw giving it the appearance of a pot bellied scarecrow. It's wearing a brown striped beige shirt and the buttons are done up all the way to the top. The sleeves hang limp across the lap.

Facing the front of the installation, the figure has no head, just a thick black column that extends from the floor between the back two chair legs and spears through the figure's collar. It tapers off into a thin branch at

the very top of the house and looks like an elongated neck or spine or even a chimney breast. Veiny, finger-like twigs shoot off to the left and right, yearning towards the periphery of the roof but stopping just short. As you exit this gallery a set of semi-automatic doors lead to Gallery 2. This is the end of stop 2.

### Stop 3 - *Cataract*

The gallery echoes with the sound of 240 35mm slides that click regularly in rotation in 3 analogue slide tape projectors. They are suspended from the ceiling in a three-tier open backed white shelf. The lowest hangs at around one and a half metres from the ground.

A cycle of still face portraits of Black men are projected onto the wall opposite, changing every few seconds. They fill the wall from four metres high to two and a half metres wide. The three projectors produce a collaged effect of misaligned features; one man's eyes with another man's mouth, or two different eyes paired with a stranger's nose and another man's moustache. Sometimes features appear doubled or overlaid on top of each other creating a disjointed abstract fictional face. The men are anonymous although Rodney's complete portrait occasionally appears amid the montage as well as blank black slides. The fragments are reminiscent of facial composites or police photo fits - a defunct method of combining photographs of facial features into a composite picture of a face based on eyewitnesses' descriptions of a perpetrator. The slideshow never fixes on a face for more than a few seconds and it rarely aligns into a full portrait of one person. Together the mismatched features form wonky, solemn expressions, grave eyes staring out with closed mouths. This is the end of stop 3.

### Stop 4 - *Visceral Canker*

This piece displays theatrical blood.

The sound of pumping blood and churning mechanisms fills the space. Visceral Canker is spread across two pairs of boards mounted beside each other on a freestanding wall. The first set is wooden then perspex and the second slightly smaller set is the mirror reverse of this arrangement. Both pairs have perspex covers bolted to their fronts and both are linked by their own separate circulatory systems which continuously pump imitation blood through a network of silicone medical tubes.

Starting on the left, the first pair of boards is the largest. The varnished wooden board is around 4m high by 2m wide and is decorated in the sixteenth century coat of arms of Sir John Hawkins whose name is inscribed along the bottom in gold. At the top of the coat of arms is a bare-chested enslaved Black man pictured from the torso up. He has a short fluffy afro with gold rings in his ears and his arms are forced open by gold shackles. He's sitting on a giant knight's head, whose face is obscured behind a silver helmet. Beneath this, a heraldic shield takes up the majority of the board in vivid colours. It's divided into quarters. The top left quarter depicts fleur-de-lys, an emblem in the shape of a lily. To its right is a black spyglass flanked by red anchors. The trio float above rows of wavy blue lines that represent the sea. In the bottom left quarter striding gold lions ride more blue waves. But the final bottom right quarter features three enslaved Black people. Only their heads are pictured in glossy dark brown, and white shackles bind their throats.

To the right of this is a perspex board around the same size. It is completely transparent and dotted with various mechanisms - a small

electrical grey pump is in the centre, connected to a green circuit board to its immediate right and a multitude of rainbow-coloured wires. This is connected to an intravenous drip bag full of dark red imitation blood, positioned on the left side of the board. It oozes through two long silicon tubes that exit the bag, cross the empty wall space back to the wooden board on the left and loop over Hawkins' coat of arms, the knight's head and the enslaved faces of Black people. They form a complex network, criss-crossing over each other as they connect one board to the other.

Further along the wall, the next pair of boards are linked in a similar way. We start this time with a smaller perspex board around a metre and a half by a metre with the same mechanisms on show. The pump is in the centre and the intravenous drip bag is on the right, closer to the final wooden board which displays Queen Elizabeth I's royal coat of arms. It centres a small blue and red shield flanked by a gold lion of England rearing onto its hind legs on the left and a red dragon of Wales on the right. The shield is topped with a roaring golden lion sitting on a bejewelled crown. Beneath the coat of arms the Queen's personal motto, "Semper Eadem" Latin for "always the same" is written across an elaborate cream scroll. Queen Elizabeth I is engraved in gold at the bottom of the board. The tubes of blood wind over the Latin motto, weave across the emblems of England and Wales and pass over the highly decorative design of the crown. All the time blood is pumping back and forth across the two sets of boards in a noisy, slow journey. As you exit this gallery a set of semi automatic doors lead briefly to the shop floor. Take a sharp left for the doors to Gallery 3. This is the end of stop 4.



## Stop 5 Part 1- Preparatory Drawings for the work *Soweto/Guernica*

The preparatory drawings are spread across two neighbouring displays, the first is on a table and the second is within a vitrine.

A freestanding frieze rests on a slender wooden top table with black legs, the table is around one metre high, a metre and a half long and 60 cm wide. Traditionally a frieze is a continuous horizontal strip of decoration on a wall, containing figurative or ornamental motifs. In this case Rodney's frieze is a series of densely packed black silhouetted figures photocopied onto four sheets of clear, transparent acetate. The sheets are joined together, held in a black perspex glazed frame with a white inlaid border thus forming one continuous metre and a half long strip. It stands upright, around 30 cm high, is landscape-oriented and can be viewed from the front and back. These drawings on acetate were later used by Rodney to project the images onto a wall to create the actual frieze.

A parade of black figures erupt into violence and frenzied movement. We move from left to right, starting on the far left. We take in a silhouetted policeman standing in profile, facing right while brandishing a truncheon at a stick person. Next, people with boar heads wield maces and swords, followed by a burning two storey house. A person ducks with a raised hand as a mounted police officer on horseback charges towards them with their baton high. Two more cartoon-like stick people spread their arms wide forming a barrier between the police and protesting civilians. A gramophone lies at their feet. People with horse heads kneel alongside a crumpled man on his back. One horse person launches themselves to the right, on the verge of re-entering the fray of battle. The far right side of the frieze ends with a collective act as half-horse people and regular humans hoist up a tall flagpost, letting its black flag flutter at the top. This

is the end of Stop 5 Part 1. Feel free to move to the right to take in the second part of this stop.

## Stop 5 Part 2 - Preparatory Drawings for the work *Soweto/Guernica*

Two pen drawings of the same scene lie flat beside each other within a slightly lower vitrine to the right of the frieze. This vitrine is much longer than the plinth extending 4 metres and also displays four photographs at its far right end. The first drawing depicts the same characters in black silhouette like the frieze. These are tests across five paper sheets which were originally joined together but only the tape residue remains along the edges.

The second landscape drawing to its right contains hand-written annotations above and below black pen outlines of the same characters. It gives the panels a storyboard feel. The order of the figures is slightly different but it still starts on the left with the policeman in profile this time declaring "This is for your own good". The burning house in the middle is marked as the house of Cherry Groce and Cynthia Jarrett. Rodney identifies as a man in a hat about to lob a molotov cocktail writing "portrait of the artist's retaliation". The police officer on horseback says "I make you obey". The pen outline recalls an iconic photograph of Lesley Hughes, a real-life protestor at the Battle of Orgreave, a violent confrontation between picketing miners and police officers in the 1980s. A postcard sized reproduction of this photograph taken by John Harris is on display at the end of the vitrine. The parade of figures continues to the right with an outline of a gramophone on the ground, labelled - His Master's Voice referencing the retailer's iconic logo. The name Colin Roach is drawn above an outline of a crumpled man writhing on his back. And finally the brutal statement "Officers explain to the sceptic how the state is always right" floats above horse-people hoisting the flag post.

Here the same characters from the frieze recur, but this time in black and white, fleshed out with speech and names.

At the end of the vitrine, four photos capture the work and its inspirations. They are displayed in a T-shape, starting with two postcard sized photographs at the top and then two larger photographs one below the other. The first photograph on the top left shows the frieze as a triptych, an artwork across three panels. This time the medium is oil pastel on x-ray sheets. To the right of this is a photo of Lesley Hughes about to be struck by the police at the Battle of Orgreave. Below these are two larger photographs, the first depicting Picasso's *Guernica* embellished with Rodney's own collaged figures, notably a black person in the centre carrying a lifeless black person in their arms. And finally the last photograph captures a member of the public visiting one of Rodney's shows in an exhibition space. Near life-size cut-out figures of silhouetted police officers, horse-people and trampled protestors are mounted to the wall. They're made from X-ray displaying the distinctive blue-ish grey and black and these huge symbols of the state tower above the gallery visitor. This is the end of Stop 5 Part 2.

## ***Stop 6 - In The House of My Father and My Mother, My Father, My Sister, My Brother***

Two white frames both over a metre by a metre and a half large hang beside each other. The first on the left contains a colour landscape-orientated photograph which hones in on an outstretched dark brown hand resting palm side up on a white cloth. The base of the palm is on the left and the fingers are spread out on the right with the front of the hand facing us. The fingers are slightly unfurled and nestled in the centre of the palm is a miniature light brown house-shaped structure made from dry human skin. Its shape alludes to a two storey house with a gabled triangular roof.

The actual 3D house is titled *My Mother, My Father, My Sister, My Brother* and is on display in the white frame on the right. It's balanced in the very centre on a floating perspex shelf just a touch larger than the house itself which itself is only 3 cm high and 2cm wide and deep. It's tiny especially when staged against a vast white backdrop.

Its size invites you for closer inspection. The rudimentary, fragile form is precariously and crudely held together by several criss-crossing silver dressmaker's pins that poke through the flake-thin walls. Without them it could easily topple over or be blown away by breath alone. A rectangular hole at the bottom indicates a door or entryway and a triangular opening along the roof suggests a window or skylight. The medium toned brown skin is dry, streaked in white chapped lines and appears to be several short sheets of skin pinned together to form the walls. Light from the gallery ceiling spotlights casts a shadow of the house below the shelf, an even tinier upside-down reproduction of the structure. This is the end of Stop 6.

There is a fork in the path at the end of this stop. You can choose to go right and enter a darkened room playing a 25 minute film on a loop. There is seating and although the film does not currently have audio description, it is mostly compiled of interviews overlaid with Donald's art. If you choose the left path, you will continue around the gallery and enter Gallery 4. This is the end of stop 6.

## Stop 7 - *Psalms*

Gallery 4 echoes with the sound of wheels rolling over wooden floorboards. A motorised wheelchair titled *Psalms* moves independently in jerky, halting spurts across the space. It has no occupant but it once

belonged to Rodney. It's upholstered in deep red padded leather and two grey back wheels are slightly larger and thicker than the front wheels. A laptop PC 586 is mounted to the back on a stand. Lines of code scroll continuously down its blue screen as it runs a neural network-based computer programme to map out its journey. Eight sonar sensors around the frame of the seat detect obstacles and a video camera on the chair's back once acted as Rodney's eyes during an exhibition at the South London Gallery which he couldn't attend due to illness. This work was produced shortly after the death of Rodney's father, a Windrush generation migrant from Jamaica. Rodney was too ill to be at his father's Nine Night, a Jamaican practice to celebrate the passage of a person's spirit. In some ways this wheelchair is both a stand in for Rodney and his father. *Psalms* is meant to move in a harmonious figure of eight and stop when it senses an obstacle but nowadays it deviates from its path, sometimes nudging against visitors or the display cabinets housing Stop 8's *Doublethink*. Mounted to the white wall directly behind *Psalms* is a striking line of 20 pure white plaster casts of the entire set of the Children's Encyclopaedia Britannica. The real encyclopaedia were bought by Donald's father from a travelling salesman to further his son's education and here their white-washed plaster replicas act as another connection to his father. Guide dogs can be left with the gallery invigilator, positioned at the head of the room, on the threshold to Gallery 3. This is the end of stop 7.

## Stop 8 - *Doublethink*

4 display cases over a metre in height and width present around 70 sporting trophies arranged in rows of three. The cases have varnished wooden bases and perspex hoods and are positioned in two rows with space for visitors to pass between. The trophies vary in size and design, the tallest measuring almost 60 cm high and the smallest coming in at approximately 17 cm high. They glint and shine from behind the cases in a range of polished bronze, gold or silver bowls and cups mounted on

wooden bases. Many of them are topped with athletic hyper masculine male bodies poised in the act of dribbling a football, swinging a cricket bat or sprinting.

On the base of each trophy is a black plaque engraved in gold text. Where you might expect names, dates and accomplishments, here Rodney has engraved racist stereotypes, overheard comments from members of the public, and racialised statements all relating to Black people. For example one reads: 'Black street culture is a violent culture' and 'Black sportsmen take drugs' and another declares 'Black children have no intelligence'. They go on and on, rows of engraved phrases in neat, unembellished font.

Although each plaque is unique, some of the trophies appear multiple times across the cases or even within the same case, suggesting that some were bought in bulk and easy to come by - the kind of trophies you might buy for a children's sports day event or amateur sports competition.

The tallest and most ornate in the pack towers at almost 60 cm high in the centre of three out of four of the cases. We will focus on the one in the front case on the left where you are currently positioned. This trophy is split across two levels. At the top is a golden batsman wearing a cricket helmet, balanced on a short platform like a skateboard on the lid of a giant golden cup. With ribbed handles and a dark blue rim, it stands out as the most impressive with a marble-like base that bears the first plaque: "All black men are poor." This statement is flanked by golden eagles fanning their extended wings in the air. Two dark blue round columns connect this marble to the bottom base which has a round plate depicting a pleasant game of cricket above a longer inscription on its plaque: "Black people are at the heart of all past and present health epidemics."

As a collective of trophies they appear as a proud collection of honours, awards and achievements, so big it has to span 4 cases. But only on closer inspection do the engravings undermine the pomp and spectacle, revealing the nation's racialised prejudices and the empty, trivial celebration of Black success. This is the end of Stop 8.

## Stop 9 - Credits

Audio description was written and narrated by Elaine Lillian Joseph from global majority audio description collective, SoundScribe.

Audio description consultant was Michelle Felix of the Michelle Felix Group. Both are of Jamaican descent and born and bred in the West Midlands.

Audio description was commissioned by Assistant Curator of Exhibitions, Niall Farrelly and Marketing Manager, Catherine Masters from Nottingham Contemporary. Generous advice and insight came from Michael Conroy, CEO of My Sight Nottinghamshire, a charity for people with sight loss and service user Sian Petty, was the Lived Experience Advisor.

This audio described guide was mixed by sound engineer, Rosie Ridgway. This is the end of the audio guide and the end of Stop 9.