

Laylah Ali

17 January – 24 February
2007 at inIVA

the kiss and other warriors is the first UK exhibition of internationally-acclaimed artist Laylah Ali. Combining paintings and new drawings, Ali continues her exploration of the social dynamics of violence and cultural difference. Playful while at the same time deeply disturbing, the cartoon-like imagery with its ambiguous narratives offers uncanny resonances to present-day conflicts. Accompanying the exhibit is a newly-commissioned artist's book titled *Notes with Little Illustration*.

Born in 1968 in Buffalo, New York, Laylah Ali studied at the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program, the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture, and received a MFA in painting from Washington University in St Louis, Missouri in 1994. Her exhibitions include solo exhibitions at the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston; Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; Contemporary Art Museum, St Louis; Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art; and the Museum of Modern Art, New York, among others. Her work was also exhibited at the Venice Biennale (2003) and the Whitney Biennial (2004). Ali lives and works in Williamstown, Massachusetts.

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The Institute of International Visual Arts (inIVA) is a contemporary arts organisation promoting artists from diverse cultural backgrounds through exhibitions, publications, research and educational ventures. inIVA has a special interest in new technologies, international collaborations and commissioning site-specific artworks.

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Wednesday-Saturday 12-6pm
Admission free

inIVA





Laylah Ali

Solo Exhibitions

2007 Institute of International Visual Arts, London, UK.
2005 303 Gallery, New York, USA.
Typology, Gertrude Contemporary Art Space, Melbourne, Australia.
2004 Contemporary Art Museum, St Louis, USA.
2003 Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, USA.
2002 *Project 75*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA.
 Atlanta College of Art Gallery, Atlanta, USA.
 Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indianapolis, USA.
2001 Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, USA.
 Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, USA.
2000 303 Gallery, New York, USA.
 Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art, North Adams, USA.

Collaboration

2005 *Figures on a Field*, collaboration (performance) with Dean Moss, The

Kitchen, New York, USA.

Other

2004 *Walker Without Walls*, outdoor billboard project, with Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, USA.

Selected Group Exhibitions

2006 *Alien Nation*, ICA, London; Manchester Art Gallery; Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, Norwich, UK.
Black Alphabet, Zacheta Narodowa Gallery, Warsaw, Poland.
American Matrix, Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida, USA.
The Body, The Ruin, Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne, Australia.
2005 *Vivisección*: Dibujo Contemporáneo, Museo de Arte Carrillo Gil, Mexico.
Cut, Susan Vielmetter Los Angeles Projects, USA.
2004 *Whitney Biennial of American Art*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA.
2003 *The 10 Commandments*, KW Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin, Germany.
Material Witness, Museum of Contemporary Art, Cleveland, USA.

me & more, Kunstmuseum Lucerne, Lucerne, Switzerland.
Fault Lines: Contemporary African Art and Shifting Landscapes, curated by Gilane Tawadros, with the Forum for African Arts, Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy.
Splat, Boom, Pow, Contemporary Art Museum, Houston, USA (travelling to the Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, and the Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus).
2002 *Comic Release: Negotiating Identity for a New Generation*, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, USA (travelling to the Center for Contemporary Art, New Orleans; University of North Texas Gallery, Denton; and Western Washington University, Bellingham).
Fantasyland, D'Amelio Terras, New York, USA.
Painting in Boston, DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Lincoln, USA.
First Person Singular, Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, USA.



2001 *Against the Wall*: Painting against the Grid, Surface, Frame, ICA, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, USA.
A Work in Progress: Selections from the New Museum Collection, New Museum, New York, USA.
Premio Regione Piemonte, Palazzo Re Rebaudengo, Italy.
Freestyle, Studio Museum in Harlem, New York, USA.
FRESH: The Altoids Curiously Strong Collection 1998–2000, The New Museum, New York, USA.

BIBLIOGRAPHY Exhibition Catalogues

2005 *The Body, The Ruin*, Potter Museum, University of Melbourne, Australia.
2004 *2004 Whitney Biennial Catalogue*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, USA.
material witness, curated by Margo Crutchfield, Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland, Cleveland, Ohio, USA.
2003 Peter Fischer and Susanne Neubauer, *me & more*, Kunstmuseum Luzern, Lucerne, Switzerland.
Crosscurrents at Century's End: Selections from the Neuberger Berman Art Collection, Neuberger Berman, New York, USA.
Fault Lines: Contemporary African Art and Shifting Landscapes, curated by Gilane Tawadros, with the Forum for African Arts, Venice Biennale, Venice, Italy, with text by Lisa Fischman, pp 97–103.
2002 *Comic Release: Negotiating Identity for a New Generation*, Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., USA.



2001 Arnold J. Kemp, 'Laylah Ali: Paintings from the Greenheads Series' in *Try This On!*, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, USA.
 Jessica Morgan, Rebecca Walker and Suzanne Wise, *Laylah Ali*, Institute of Contemporary Art, Boston, USA.

Artist's Books

2004 *Types*, Contemporary Art Museum, St Louis, 36 pages, colour/black and white.
2002 *Untitled*, Museum of Modern Art, New York

as part of Project series, 36 pages, full colour.

Other Publications

2005 *art: 21: Art in the 21st Century: Season 3*, Harry N. Abrams, Inc.
2002 *Vitamin P*, Phaidon Press, London, UK, pp 28–29.

Far left: Laylah Ali, *Untitled*, 2005, gouache and acrylic on paper.
 Left: Laylah Ali, *Untitled*, 2006, ink and pencil on paper.
 Above: Laylah Ali, *Untitled*, 2006, ink and pencil on paper.
 Front cover and reverse: Laylah Ali, *Untitled*, 2006, ink and pencil on paper.
 All images courtesy 303 gallery, New York.

Laylah Ali

in conversation with Cylena Simonds, Curator, Exhibition Projects, inIVA.

Cylena Simonds: Can you tell me more about the title you chose for the exhibition, *the kiss and other warriors*, and the relationship suggested between affection and violence?

Laylah Ali: I am not sure what is transpiring between some of these figures is as gentle as affection. They are physically interacting – they are attracting – and you might even call what they are doing kissing, though I have a friend who insists on calling their actions ‘tonguing’, which is perhaps more physically accurate. These are awkward, rather than completely fluid and mutually pleasurable, exchanges.

I don’t see violence as being opposite to attraction – and perhaps not always that distant from affection. I grew up in a house where they were bound. Your love for someone could be marbled with strands of hatred and fear.

CS: It’s true that a kiss can be more ambiguous than affection implies. Today, we often kiss someone, on one or both cheeks, as a greeting, even if we have met the person only once before. Tonguing has a more sexual connotation, and implies an intense physical interaction. The expressions of the characters could be read as ecstasy but also as pain, potentially. The expressions also remind me of

depictions of spiritual revelations and intellectual enlightenment. Are there references to these kinds of knowledge in the work?

LA: One of the rare good things about being American – and I guess I mean in a family that has been in the US for many generations so you’ve lost any sort of real link with your customs of origin – is that, for the most part, we don’t have the custom of kissing people you hardly know on the cheek, though it does seem to persist in gallery circles. They do it in Australia, where I am right now, and I find myself tensing up when it happens – like, here it comes, that horrible cheek kiss. Sometimes twice in a row. Meaningless contact: it means nothing, solidifies nothing, introduces no new narratives. I find a handshake more telling.

But back to your question – I just had to get that off my chest – I think the thing that the figures have in common in the paired pictures is that each figure is experiencing a moment that is not shared in the same way by the other.

So a spiritual moment for one is a duty for the other. Arousing ecstasy for one is puzzling for another. All of this is complicated by the imposition of an implied external viewing during this intimate moment. So, no matter what the internal emotions may be, the figures are obscured and changed by our impulse and

need to articulate who they are. Their interaction is with each other and with us.

CS: Your work has a very narrative feel, almost like a journal at times. Are there specific stories behind the characters?

LA: Though I might have an idea of a mood, a demeanour or a look for a character, when I put pen to paper, I allow the ink drawings to be spontaneous. So, they become what they become despite my original intentions. I’d say they are about 40 per cent intention and 60 per cent unknown. The narrative elements start to settle in and be activated later, after the drawings are done and can play off of each other.

The paintings are much more planned. They are devised and laid out. They are planned in groups, so their relationships with each other are more strategic.

CS: The way you describe your work reminds me of the automatic drawings of the Surrealists. They believed that abandoning conscious control would allow for repressed aspects of the psyche to be revealed. Do you see your spontaneous drawings relating to the practice of automatic drawing? For me, your work differs from the work of the Surrealists in that what is revealed has more to do with the perceptions or preconceptions of the viewer.

LA: I think that a brown person who has lived amongst a white majority – and this could apply to any visible minority, though I think it is intensified in those groups that have a long historical track record of being despised – has often been looked at, singled out, noticed, because of the visual spectacle that is inherent in being visually different. In this position, and this applies to me, I believe that one’s mind and intimate psychology can become very attuned to the feeling and reality of being surveyed. So it is not unusual to think of the perceptions or preconceptions of the viewer – and to have that deeply embedded almost as a survival mechanism – because in order to be safe or successful, or to procure what one needs, one

must be aware of the possible readings of one’s external self and the multiple ways that external self could be interpreted in various situations. I think one of the key issues here is the multiple ways that one can be viewed – it can be quite layered and complicated, and can even evolve over a few minutes.

So, I do agree that my drawings are infused with subconscious offerings, though they are also guided by conscious pre-occupations. I often describe my work as psycho-political, meaning it is where the loose ends of my psyche meet the world.

CS: Your earlier work featured groups of characters often interacting in violent ways. The paintings and black and white drawings in inIVA’s exhibition are more like portraits, close-ups of individual characters focusing on expressions and moods. Can you talk about your different strategies for these works?

LA: My earlier work was concerned with moments around physical violence, whether



political violence or inter-personal violence, or somewhere in between. I still am drawn to those moments but via different routes, so exploring these individual characters – who exist more as types than fully realised individuals – is another route. I have become interested in exploring ‘types’ and blurring the distinctions between the obvious and absurd ways that people are visually categorised. Yet types are also useful in that they contain within them instant narrative. So we all understand the immediately revealed, usually derogatory, narrative contained within a stereotype. And we might be sympathetic to other kinds of typology: she is a working class mother; he is a Democrat. We use this kind of shorthand all the time. In my new drawings, I aim to fuse recognisable types with question marks, fuse known narratives with things that are not as easily articulated. The inbuilt narratives within what is recognisable give the viewer a place to start. So, we might start with what looks like a kiss, but what kind of kiss is this? Who are these people?

CS: I think that this play between recognisable types and unfamiliar signs is what I find intriguing but also unsettling. On the one hand, the works are disturbing or have a sense of foreboding. And yet, at the same time, they can be playful in the formal qualities of colour and line and humorous expressions of the characters. This movement between familiarity and strangeness is very uncanny; in fact it is one of the definitions of the term. And the uncanny experience has been noted in post-colonial theory as particularly useful for understanding the way racial difference performs in the psyche of Western society. Is the uncanny an important theme for your practice?

LA: I’ve never termed it uncanny but, as you describe it, it makes sense when I think about the way things shift in my work. I’m not sure how humour functions in theories of the uncanny. The role of humour in my work has always been of interest to me, but usually after the fact rather than while making it – because I

don’t necessarily think of the choices I make as humorous. It is not really deliberately humorous but more an absurdist take on things.

CS: I’ve noticed that the paintings in this exhibition have more detail than in your early paintings. The characters all have elaborate head-dresses, for example. Can you tell me more about your inspiration for these details?

LA: The head-dresses have been inspired by an amalgamation of hair, feather head-dresses and the headgear of the Catholic hierarchy. I think the earlier work concentrated on the details of the physical interactions. Those figures tended to be less individualistic and more a part of teams – and their dress reflected that by being more like uniforms or athletic wear. The newer work is relatively still, and thus the physical drama has been replaced, in some ways, by the narratives implied by what they might be wearing or their manner of physical bearing. The details of the clothing hint at affiliations, status, aspirations. I think there is a sort of replacement drama in the patterns created – and also distraction. All that layering as if to disguise some essential self that isn’t really there.

CS: Also, it seems the activity is occurring just outside of the frame, and in that sense the works are reminiscent of film or animation. Are you interested in working in these media?

LA: Right now, for my own work, I prefer the stillness of paintings and drawings. I like the way that stillness can invite a viewer in and that a reflective space exists that is activated – or not – by the viewer. I am interested in paintings and drawings having tangible ‘bodies’ that exist in the world.

The magical distance and ghostliness of film and animation – and their insistence on being watched – are of interest to me, but I haven’t quite reached the point where I feel the need to work in moving pictures. It often seems like an inevitable progression these days, and I think one of the attractions of film is that it seems more open and democratic in its reach.



CS: You have also produced a book, *Notes with Little Illustration*, in conjunction with the exhibition. Can you say a little about your interest in presenting your work in this format?

LA: I guess this relates a bit to my answer to your film question – because I do have a desire to reach outside of traditional viewing spaces. I like the way that a book can travel unexpected paths, and be examined at your leisure, and at the pace you want because you can always look at it again easily. It is both a deliberate and an incidental object simultaneously.

CS: Last year, you collaborated with Dean Moss on *Figures on a Field*, a live performance that took place at The Kitchen in New York. How did it feel to work with your imagery in real time, in front of a live audience?

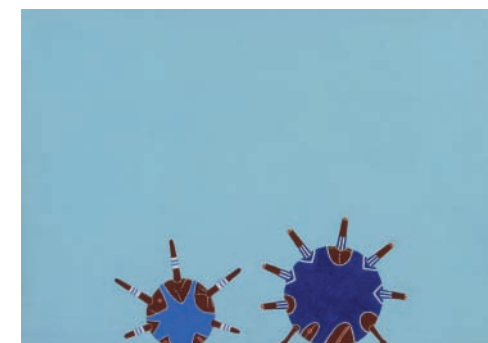
LA: In the performance, the violence was amplified with real bodies. That was perhaps the most noticeable and jarring difference. Trafficking in 2-D violence is obviously not the

same as real bodies in front of you – even though they weren’t really hurting each other, the effect was still very different, very full on. So when one of the dancers is pelted on the head by the others with dodge balls, and her head bobs from the hits, it is intensely uncomfortable. I think I prefer the distance of working in 2-D because it allows for some emotional distance.

Also, I was interested in how a performance can change each time – there are so many components that go into what might be considered a successful version of it. With my painting and drawing, I decide whether something should go out in the world after it is done. But the unpredictability of live performance was very new to me – and it was hard to give up that autocratic control. But I enjoyed working with other people – I think ultimately, as a lifelong endeavour, it might be a healthier way to be creative.

CS: Can you tell us about your future plans?

LA: Right now, I am working on a show of drawings that is to open in Philadelphia shortly after the inIVA show, and which will travel to a couple of locations in the US. In the meantime, fledgling painting ideas are knocking around my head, readying themselves for the next series of paintings, which always takes me a fair amount of time to complete.



Far left: Laylah Ali, *Untitled*, 2006, ink and pencil on paper. Above Left: Laylah Ali, *Untitled*, 2006, ink and pencil on paper. Above: Laylah Ali, *Untitled*, 2005, gouache and acrylic on paper. All images courtesy 303 gallery, New York.