

Can 48 Artists in 14 Rooms Capture Michael Jackson?

[nytimes.com/2018/07/20/arts/design/michael-jackson-london-national-portrait-gallery.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/20/arts/design/michael-jackson-london-national-portrait-gallery.html)

By Thomas Chatterton Williams

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LONDON — When the world first learned of Michael Jackson's death, from an accidental overdose in 2009, the news had a whiff of unreality about it. This was in no small part because, for so long, it had been hard to remember that he was actually a person. A child prodigy who in adulthood became a genuine Peter Pan — fantastically refusing to grow old — Jackson was always more an idea than a human being in the flesh. Nearly a decade later, the shape-shifting body frozen in memory, his extraordinary image endures as if he never left.

Now, an ambitious and thought-provoking new exhibition at the National Portrait Gallery in London, running through Oct. 21, seeks to measure the impact and reach of Jackson as muse and cultural artifact. “Michael Jackson: On the Wall,” curated by Nicholas Cullinan, sprawls without feeling bloated, occupying 14 rooms and bringing together the work of 48 artists across numerous media, from Andy Warhol's instantly recognizable silk-screen prints and grainy black-and-white snapshots, to a vast oil painting by Kehinde Wiley. (Jeff Koons's famous porcelain sculpture “Michael Jackson and Bubbles” is notably absent, though it is reinterpreted in several other pieces.)



The photographer David LaChapelle made several portraits of Jackson, including “An Illuminating Path” from 1998. Credit Courtesy of the artist

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First the obvious: No artwork, however clever or pretty, that has been inspired by a talent the size of Jackson’s can compete with its source material. To get the most out of what this show has to offer it is best to acknowledge this at the entrance and move on, as the most successful pieces do, eschewing strictly aesthetic concerns and exploring instead Jackson’s conceptual possibilities.

Consider for example one of the simplest works in the show, David Hammons’s 2001 installation, “Which Mike Do You Want to Be Like...?” The piece — full of wondrous pride even as it conjures a sense of depressing limitation — consists of three abnormally tall microphones and its title recalls the Holy Trinity of late-20th-century black American entertainment icons as set out by the rapper The Notorious B.I.G.: “I excel like Mike, anyone: Tyson, Jordan, Jackson.” (B.I.G.’s own guest feature on Jackson’s 1995 “History” album marked a crowning achievement in his career.) More than 20 years later, rappers still clamor for a Jackson co-sign. On “Scorpion,” his latest chart-topping release, Drake flexed the ultimate status symbol, having purchased the rights to unreleased vocals and scoring a posthumous feature with the King of Pop.

Jackson, more than Tyson or even Jordan, so epitomized black excellence that Ebony magazine could unselfconsciously run an airbrushed image of him on the cover in 2007, his creamy skin and silky cascading hair framing a razor-sharp jawline, beside a headline reading “Inside: The Africa You Don’t Know.”

Image

A “dinner jacket” for Jackson by his longtime costume designer, Michael Lee Bush, is adorned with cutlery. The garment appears in the London show. Credit: John Branca/Julien’s Auctions

A year after the singer’s death, Lyle Ashton Harris recreated that image on Ghanaian funerary fabric. It’s jarring to compare the real late-life M.J. with another imaginary iteration that Hank Willis Thomas appropriates in one of the show’s more shocking offerings, “Time Can Be a Villain or a Friend (1984/2009).”

In this, we see an uncannily convincing, and wholesomely handsome rendition of Jackson with his natural skin tone, a pencil-thin mustache on his lip and an ever-so-lightly relaxed puff of hair on his head.

Mr. Thomas explains in the catalog that it is simply an artist's rendering from a 1984 issue of *Ebony*, a glimpse of what the magazine imagined Jackson would look like in the year 2000. Without any alteration, it is by far "On the Wall's" most critical work — the image originally so full of pride and hope is now an indictment, and haunts the show like a scathing rebuke.

In this *post-post-racial*, post-Obama era of resurgent populism and Balkanized identity politics, it really does feel as though it matters — and matters more than anything else — whether you're black or white. It does make for a particularly fascinating moment to re-evaluate Jackson's image as a fundamentally "black" but simultaneously racially transcendent figure, or a monstrous desecration, depending on your perspective. Indeed, there is a push and pull between these running through the exhibition and the catalog that accompanies it.

In the catalog, the critic Margo Jefferson calls Jackson "a postmodern trickster god," noting "what visceral emotion he stirred (and continues to stir) in us!" She anticipates, in the next pages, the novelist and essayist Zadie Smith's castigating contribution. Ms. Smith writes of her mother's initial preoccupation with the singer: "I think the Jacksons represented the possibility that black might be beautiful, that you might be adored in your blackness — worshiped, even." But, she adds, "By the time I became aware of Michael— around 1980 or so — my mother was finished with him, for reasons she never articulated, but which became clear soon enough. For me, he very soon became a traumatic figure, shrouded in shame."

"It was as if the schizophrenic, self-hating, hypocritical and violent history of race in America had incarnated itself in a single man," Ms. Smith concludes.

This critique is at odds with the warmth with which many black people still hold the singer, particularly in the United States, where he remains enormously beloved. But it calls to mind the furious assault on Jackson's racial credentials with which Ta-Nehisi Coates began [a recent essay on Kanye West](#) "Michael Jackson was God, but not just God in scope and power, though there was certainly that, but God in his great mystery," Mr. Coates writes. "And he had always been dying — dying to be white." He continues:

We knew that we were tied to him, that his physical destruction was our physical destruction, because if the black God, who made the zombies dance, who brokered great wars, who transformed stone to light, if he could not be beautiful in his own eyes, then what hope did we have — mortals, children — of ever escaping what they had taught us, of ever escaping what they said about our mouths, about our hair and our skin, what hope did we ever have of escaping the muck? And he was destroyed.

Such criticism, however heartfelt and comprehensible, makes the mistake of reducing Jackson to the role of tribal ambassador in a society built on oversimplified and regressive notions of racial and gender identity that his own art and self-presentation never stopped pushing against. It occludes the far subtler and more interesting insights that a genius can provoke, and too confidently pigeonholes an individual who knowingly rejected the stifling limitations of his country's artificial racial binary for a dupe. The man who wrote "We Are the World" and "Liberian Girl," and proudly recreated Egyptian splendor in "Remember the Time," had an idealistic and expansive view of our common humanity. His androgyny, too, helped shatter restrictive notions of black masculinity.

One of the most counterintuitive and compelling contributions to "On the Wall" is Lorraine O'Grady's series of four diptychs, "The First and Last of the Modernists (Charles and Michael)." Comprising blown-up found photographs of the 19th-century

French poet Charles Baudelaire and Jackson striking similar poses and tinted in a variety of pastel hues, like many of the works here, these pieces deal inventively with the theme of mirroring.

"When Michael died, I tried to understand why was I crying like he was a member of my family," Ms. O'Grady explained in an interview at the show's opening in June. "I realized the only person I could compare him to was Baudelaire," she said, listing ambiguous sexuality and a proclivity for wearing makeup as commonalities.

"But more importantly, they both had this exalted idea of the role of the artist," Ms. O'Grady added. "If Baudelaire thought he tried to explain the new world he was living in to the people around him, Michael had an even more exalted vision: He felt that he was capable of uniting the entire world through his music."

In Ms. O'Grady's view, Jackson didn't simply try to become "white," as his detractors would have it — rather he "crafted himself physically to appeal to every demographic possible," she said. By the time of his death, Jackson had long been one of the most famous people on the planet, if not the most famous. The footage of his "Dangerous" tour in newly post-Ceausescu Romania, on display in an eerie loop, provides hallucinatory testament to his outrageous global reach. It is estimated that his memorial service at the Staples Center in Los Angeles reached at least a billion people worldwide.

“The first of the new is always the last of something else,” Ms. O’Grady notes in the catalog. Baudelaire, she writes, “was both the first of the modernists and the last of the romantics.” And Jackson “may have been the last of the modernists (no one can ever aspire to greatness that unironically again) but he was the first of the postmodernists.”

He was, perhaps, the first of the post-racialists, too. Yet in our hyper-connected age of heightened political consciousness and reactionary fervor, in which identity is both a weapon and a defense, that view of race can feel naïve. But this is a failure of our own imaginations and dreams, not his. As “On the Wall” makes clear, Jackson’s own face — through a combination of fame and relentless surgery — became a mask, reflecting our own biases and ideals while concealing a deeper truth. His art and lasting appeal, on the other hand, function as a reminder to consider our own disguises, and what we might gain by letting them go.