

Billie Jean is not my Louvre The King of Pop, the artist's muse

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“On The Wall”, an exhibition in London, asks why Michael Jackson still captivates



Hessel Museum of Art, Bard College, New York. Courtesy of neugerriemschneider, Berlin

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by B.F.

THE National Portrait Gallery in London has struggled of late. The number of visitors fell by a third last year compared with 2016, and cost-cutting has led to voluntary redundancies. Nicholas Cullinan joined the institution as director in 2015 from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and he committed to attracting a younger and more diverse crowd—vital if the gallery is to remain competitive in an era when museums increasingly resemble Instagram fodder. “Michael Jackson: On The Wall” is the clearest attempt at reaching this new audience to date.

Nearly a decade after Jackson’s death, the world is still captivated by the musician. When Drake, a Canadian rapper, released his eagerly awaited album last week, one of its most talked-about tracks featured Jackson’s falsetto vocals. But is there anything new to say about a man who has been so relentlessly scrutinised? The show tries to provide

a different perspective by exploring his role as a muse for artists such as Andy Warhol, Kehinde Wiley and Maggi Hambling. It features a beguiling mix of works. “No other cultural figure has attracted this array, number and calibre of artists,” says Mr Cullinan.

The seeds of “On The Wall” were sown when Mr Cullinan was working on an exhibition featuring Warhol’s art at the Tate Modern, and he became aware of the artist’s relationship with the singer. The King of Pop Art met the King of Pop in New York in the 1970s, and went on to depict him numerous times. “On The Wall” includes Warhol’s vibrant screen-print portraits of Jackson that featured in *Time* magazine in 1984 (pictured, below).

Their interest was mutual: Jackson went on to reference Warhol and the wider art world through his music, videos and accompanying images. Mark Ryden’s cover for the “Dangerous” album (1991) is brim-full with references to art history. Jackson’s eyes peer out over a surreal P.T. Barnum funfair, with nods to Hieronymus Bosch, Cecil Beaton and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres’s portrait of Napoleon I. Kehinde Wiley, famed for painting Barack Obama, has spoken of Jackson’s library of art-history books and how the two discussed Mr Wiley’s studio practices. His towering portrait of Jackson on horseback, mimicking Rubens’s 17th-century painting of King Philip II, was the last likeness to be commissioned by Jackson before his death. It is the most imposing work in the exhibition, making Jackson appear impossibly majestic and handsome.

Many of the works in “On The Wall” show Jackson as tragic and vulnerable, a victim of fame. David LaChapelle, an American artist, places a limp Jackson in the arms of Christ in a forest clearing, the singer’s outstretched hand pointing to a single fallen glove. This homoerotic pastiche of *Pietà* is titled “American Jesus: Hold me, carry me boldly”. Some of these images of a persecuted saintly genius feel trite, overlooking his obsession with fame. Much more interesting are Lorraine O’Grady’s diptychs comparing Jackson with Charles Baudelaire. Using images of the two men in similar poses, she connects their pursuit of perfectionism and their dominance of their respective crafts, even as their styles and output differ.

“On The Wall” feels most timely in exploring Jackson’s position within the black community. It is only in recent years that the conversation about his identity has progressed beyond “Wacko Jacko” mockery and dismissal; today more sensitive discussions are being had about Jackson’s physical appearance and role-model status. The work of Todd Gray, Jackson’s personal photographer from 1979 to 1983, is a striking example of this. A series of collages superimpose Jackson’s image into the homes of black families in America and South Africa: it is an attempt to place Jackson back within the African diaspora, from which he is often seen as distant.

Ta-Nehisi Coates, a writer, has interpreted this distance as an attempt to escape the

narrative of struggle that comes with being black in America. In a piece for the *Atlantic*, he wrote that Jackson was a “black god dying to be white”; when he sang and danced, he tapped “into a power formed under all the killing, all the beatings, all the rape and plunder that made America”. In a recent discussion at the Southbank Centre, Margo Jefferson, a critic, offered another interpretation. Rather than trying to fit a white ideal, she said, Jackson became something else entirely: a figure who was neither black nor white, nor for that matter entirely male or female. For her, Jackson’s transformation was part of his performative approach towards life.

The 48 artists featured in the exhibition do a decent job of exploring the paradoxes and nuances of the man. A 49th artist, however, is made conspicuous by his absence. “Michael Jackson and Bubbles” (1988), Jeff Koons’s white-and-gold porcelain sculpture of the man and his chimpanzee, is possibly the most recognisable artwork of the musician; the show describes it as a “talisman for other artists”. Despite the support of Mr Koons, the gallery has not managed to procure one of the four versions of the work. It outraged fans when it was unveiled, who saw the delicate yet kitsch figure as too white and too feminine. But it foreshadowed—or maybe even influenced—the otherworldly figure of fascination that Jackson would become. The sculpture does feature, but only through Paul McCarthy’s warped styrofoam interpretation of it and Louise Lawler’s photography. The work’s not-quite-absence is inauspicious for “On The Wall”: without it, a study of Jackson’s impact on contemporary art feels incomplete.

In portraying a man who found stunning success but struggled to accept himself, “On The Wall” says little that is new about Jackson. Instead it explores how his mix of precocious talent and eccentricity proved captivating, particularly for the artists who were among his biggest fans.

“Michael Jackson: On The Wall” is showing at the National Portrait Gallery until October 21st