

INSTITUTE OF CONTEMPORARY ARTS

PRESS RELEASE

Lubaina Himid curates *Connecting Thin Black Lines* at the ICA, comprising a major group exhibition and event programme

Connecting Thin Black Lines 1985 – 2025
24 June – 7 September 2025
Institute of Contemporary Arts



Lubaina Himid, *Venetian Maps: Shoemakers*, 1997. Acrylic on canvas. Courtesy of Hollybush Gardens, London and Greene Naftali, New York © Lubaina Himid.

This summer, the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London will present *Connecting Thin Black Lines 1985 – 2025*, a major group exhibition and event programme curated by Lubaina Himid, the Turner Prize winning artist who will represent Great Britain at the 2026 Venice Biennale.

Celebrating 40 years since *The Thin Black Line*, the groundbreaking group show of young Black and Asian women artists curated by Himid at the ICA in 1985, the exhibition will present work by the original artists **Brenda Agard, Sutapa Biswas, Sonia Boyce, Chila Kumari Burman, Jennifer Comrie, Himid, Claudette Johnson, Ingrid Pollard, Veronica Ryan, Marlene Smith** and **Maud Sulter** all together for the first time. Featuring new commissions as well as artworks made over the past four decades, the exhibition will extend beyond the gallery space with a rich programme of film screenings, talks, music and live performances – fulfilling Himid's original ambition for a multi-disciplinary Black arts festival across the ICA's exhibition, cinema and live spaces.

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In the early 1980s Himid curated three exhibitions of young Black and Asian women artists, positioning their practices at the fore of debates in the British art world: *Five Black Women*, Africa Centre (1983), *Black Woman Time Now*, Battersea Arts Centre (1983 – 84), *The Thin Black Line*, ICA (1985 – 86). Developing within the wider discourse surrounding the British Black Arts Movement, these landmark exhibitions platformed female artists, highlighting the intersections between race and gender.

Now, 40 years since the original presentation at the same venue, *Connecting Thin Black Lines* at the ICA seeks to expand contemporary interpretations and conversations around the practices of these eleven artists today. Rather than a restaging or retrospective, this exhibition looks forward as much as it does back, with works made in the past four decades including two new commissions by Burman and Smith. In her signature style, Burman will light up the ICA's Concourse with new neon works and Smith's sculpture, inspired by a photograph from her late parents' family album, takes centre stage in the Lower Gallery. The earliest work in the exhibition, Sonia Boyce's *Rice n Peas* (1982) acknowledges that *The Thin Black Line* was not the sudden genesis of these artists' practices, but a coalescence formed from continuous work throughout the early 80s. Artworks created in the years following the exhibition include Jennifer Comrie's *Coming to Terms Through Conflict* (1987) and Maud Sulter's *Polyhymnia* (1989). More recent contributions include *Threads* (2024) a hanging crochet sculpture by Veronica Ryan, a glass-mounted digital print by Ingrid Pollard from her 2018 installation, *Seventeen of Sixty-Eight*, and *Birdsong* (2004) a moving image work by Sutapa Biswas.

The exhibition highlights the interconnected and wide-ranging roles that *The Thin Black Line* artists have been playing in art and exhibition making, and the meaningful paths crossed between these artists over the course of the last 40 years. This is reflected in key loans from both the Arts Council Collection – such as Johnson's *Trilogy* series depicting Black female sitters including Agard and Pollard – and from Himid's personal collection, which features works by Boyce, Pollard, Sulter, and Himid herself.

Connecting Thin Black Lines features an archival display of professional and personal documents from the original 1985 show, including photographs and never-before-seen correspondence revealing the quotidian work and care behind this historic exhibition.

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Himid has conceived of *Connecting Thin Black Lines 1985 – 2025* as a multi-vocal, multi-disciplinary project bringing together artists across a range of practices beyond the exhibition. Film screenings by **Amber Akaunu, Sutapa Biswas, Helen Cammock** and **Pratibha Parmar** will be accompanied by contextual discussions in the Cinema. Music and live performances led by **Trevor Mathison, Andra Simons, Rommi Smith** and **Magda Stawarska** will take place in the Stage. **Tao Lashley-Burnley** will take over the ICA Instagram. A critical panel discussion bringing together artists and curators will reflect on the legacy of *The Thin Black Line* and what it means to sustain radical artistic networks today.

On the occasion of this exhibition, the ICA will republish the original 1985 exhibition guide accompanied by a companion publication featuring new contributions by the participating artists of *Connecting Thin Black Lines*. The original publication serves as an important resource for curators and art historians but has been long out of print with only 27 copies held in libraries globally. Widening access to an important primary source, the new publication will also provide space for reflection today.

Connecting Thin Black Lines 1985 – 2025 is supported by The Christian Levett Collection and Musée FAMM Mougins, The Ampersand Foundation, Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, and Lubaina Himid.

Lubaina Himid's limited-edition artist print, *The Thin Black Line* (2022) originally released for the ICA's 75th anniversary, will be on display and available to purchase at the Bookshop and via shop.ica.art.

Priority booking for ICA Members will be on sale from 10am on Thursday 22 May. General booking will be available from 10am on Tuesday 27 May. For information about tickets and membership, please visit ica.art or contact: sales@ica.art / +44 (0)20 7930 3647

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Event programme

2 July, 7pm, Cinema

Pratibha Parmar: *Memory Pictures, Flesh & Paper, Khush* + Q&A

This evening brings together three films by Pratibha Parmar that explore South Asian queer diasporic life through modes of intimacy, memory, and resistance.

9 July, 7pm, Cinema

Sutapa Biswas: *Kali & Lumen* + Q&A

A special double-bill screening of Sutapa Biswas's films *Lumen* (2021) and *Kali* (1983 – 85) followed by a Q&A with the artist.

15 July, 7pm, Stage

Vex'd Bermoothes: An Evening with Four Bermuda Poets + Q&A

An evening with Bermudian poets sharing their words, exploring Bermuda and its place within Britain's wider cultural landscape.

16 July, 7pm, Cinema

Helen Cammock: *There's a Hole in the Sky Parts I & II* + Performance

Helen Cammock's two-part video work *There's a Hole in the Sky* (2016) explores the entangled legacies of colonialism, migration, and appropriation through a lyrical blend of poetry, song, and image. The screening is accompanied by a live performance in which Cammock extends the film's concerns through spoken word and song.

24 July, 7pm, Stage

***Music and Silence* (Live Performance): Magda Stawarska with Zeynep Özsuca**

Magda Stawarska reimagines her moving image installation *Music and Silence* (2023) for this unique presentation with a live performance by pianist Zeynep Özsuca.

27 July, 1pm, Stage

***Signals*: Trevor Mathison, Gary Stewart & Tansy Spinks**

An immersive audiovisual performance connecting the ICA's history from the 1980s to the present by Trevor Mathison, Gary Stewart and Tansy Spinks.

6 August, 7pm, Cinema

Pratibha Parmar: *Alice Walker – Beauty in Truth* + Q&A

This richly layered portrait of Pulitzer Prize-winning author Alice Walker traces her journey from the segregated American South to international literary and activist acclaim.

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10 August, 4pm, Gallery

***If you look very closely the poem will paint itself* – Andra Simons responds**

Poet Andra Simons will be reading in response to Marlene Smith's newly commissioned artwork for *Connecting Thin Black Lines*

13 August, 7pm, Cinema

Helen Cammock: *Changing Room*, *They Call It Idlewild* + Q&A

This screening presents two deeply personal and politically resonant works by Helen Cammock: *They Call It Idlewild* (2020) and *Changing Room* (2014), followed by a conversation with curator Nydia A. Swaby.

19 August, 7pm, Stage

Tracing The Thin Black Line: Rommi Smith with Christella Litras

Through spoken word, Rommi Smith presents a new work in collaboration with Christella Litras on keyboard/vocals, responding to *The Thin Black Line*, Maud Sulter's *Zabat* and beyond.

20 August, 7pm, Cinema

Amber Akaunu: *Dear Othermother* + Q&A

This newly commissioned film by Liverpool Biennial 2025, celebrates a deeply personal tale of friendship, single motherhood and alternative, matriarchal community networks in Liverpool 8, one of the oldest Black communities in the UK.

27 August, 7pm, Cinema

***Connecting Thin Black Lines: 1985, 2025 and Beyond* Panel Discussion**

Marking forty years since *The Thin Black Line* (1985), this panel discussion responds to *Connecting Thin Black Lines* by bringing together artists and curators to reflect on the exhibition's legacy and the evolving practices and solidarities it continues to inspire.

28 August, 7pm, Stage

***Gossip Keepers: Turtlemen* + Q&A with Andra Simons**

Bermudian writer and performer Andra Simons brings his book *Turtlemen* to the stage; an often raw and intimate telling, part myth, part truth, that wades ankle-deep into the legacies of ancestral grief and healing.

30 August, 1pm, Stage

Helen Cammock: *Che si può fare*

This deeply moving and formally inventive film explores lament as both an emotional expression and a political gesture. Interweaving women's stories of loss and resilience with Baroque music by female composers, the film reflects on how grief, resistance, and memory travel across histories and geographies.

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3 September, 7pm, Cinema

Pratibha Parmar: *Emergence*, *Sari Red*, *A Place of Rage* + Panel Discussion

This evening brings together three landmark films directed by Pratibha Parmar that chart a bold feminist politics of resistance, kinship, and solidarity across transnational feminist imaginaries. The screening will be followed by a panel discussion and the launch of a new publication on Parmar's work.

Bengi Ünsal, ICA Director says:

We at the ICA are incredibly proud to now present Lubaina Himid's original vision, which formed a festival-like takeover of the ICA. *Connecting Thin Black Lines 1985 – 2025* brings together painting, sculpture, film, installation, sound, and talks that flow seamlessly through our Lower Galleries, Concourse, Cinema, and Stage, uniting a dynamic group of artists working across disciplines throughout the summer months. Lubaina's sustained dedication towards supporting artistic networks is truly inspiring, and we are thrilled to deepen and nurture these connections – between artists, their practices, and with our audiences.

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Biographies

Brenda Agard (1961 – 2012) was a photographer and writer who described her practice of photographing Black women as a strategy to document truthful images in opposition to stereotypical representations. She was an important figure in The Black Photographers Group, which sought to platform Black photography in mainstream art venues in Britain, and was also a founding member of 'Polareyes', a journal showcasing the work of Black women photographers.

Sutapa Biswas's (b. 1962) works are shaped by her observations about the relationships between people and the places they live in. Born in India but having lived in the UK since the age of four, Biswas is especially interested in how larger historical narratives collide with the personal. Underpinned by an engagement with colonial histories and how this relates to gender, race and class, her art is nuanced by the ways in which oral narratives reveal the human condition and their relationship to our collective histories and to questions of time.

Sonia Boyce (b. 1962) is an interdisciplinary artist and academic working across film, drawing, photography, print, sound, and installation. Boyce came to prominence in the early 1980s as a key figure in the burgeoning British Black Arts Movement with figurative pastel drawings and photo collages that addressed issues of race and gender in Britain. Since the 1990s, Boyce has shifted significantly to embrace a social practice that invites improvisation, collaboration, movement, and sound with other people. Working across a range of media, Boyce's practice today is focused on questions of artistic authorship and cultural difference.

Chila Kumari Burman's (b. 1957) work has a unique visual identity spanning diverse media such as neon sculpture, printmaking, collage, painting and video. Her work is shaped by her working-class childhood in a Liverpoolian, Punjabi Hindu household, often drawing imagery from popular culture. Her practice is devoted to challenging stereotypes and placing alternative perspectives of Britishness at the forefront of art history.

Jennifer Comrie (b. 1960s) is an artist best-known for her pastel drawings which lie between figuration and abstraction, with text being an additional important part of her practice. She describes her work as emerging from the cry within her and the Black community. Her Blackness and spiritual awareness are important elements in her work, and her personal experiences directly inform her artmaking.

Lubaina Himid (b. 1954) is an artist and curator who has dedicated her career to uncovering marginalised and silenced histories, figures, and cultural moments. Himid employs her distinctive vibrant visual language across painting, drawing, printmaking, installation and assemblage, often also producing work imbued with

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performative potential. Himid's curatorial practice has championed the work of underrepresented contemporaries, particularly Black and Asian women artists.

Claudette Johnson (b. 1959) is celebrated for her figurative portraits of Black women and men in a combination of pastels, gouache and watercolour. Countering the marginalisation of Black people in Western art history, Johnson shifts perspectives and invests her portraits of family and friends with a palpable sense of presence. Johnson's empathy and intimacy with her subjects is felt through her sensitive and dramatic use of line, colour, space and scale.

Ingrid Pollard (b. 1953) is a British artist and photographer working across photography, installation, video and printmaking. Her work uses portraiture photography and traditional landscape imagery to explore social constructs such as Britishness or racial difference. Pollard nuancedly deconstructs and uncovers the complexity of assumed notions of identity, ownership, borders and subjecthood. Pollard is associated with Autograph ABP, the first Black British photographic association.

Veronica Ryan (b. 1956) is a visual artist working primarily in sculpture and assemblage. Often working from a diverse range of materials, including organic forms, Ryan's work elicits a wealth of histories, meanings and multiplicities which she describes as bearing powerful 'residues, traces, memory and deposits.' Her works' deep psychological subtext resists narrow categorisation, as she tussles with oppositional principles such as interior and exterior, absence and presence, container and contained.

Marlene Smith (b. 1964) is an artist and curator, and one of the founding members of the BLK Art Group. Smith's practice is concerned with the materiality of objects, both inherited and created, and their embodied perception. Through experimentation with their properties, biography becomes not a means of classification and stratification, but instead a similarly malleable object that becomes engaged, activated, and transformed through artistic practice.

Maud Sulter (b. 1960 – 2008) began her career as a writer and acclaimed poet, expanding her practice to include photography and performance. Sulter's multi-faceted practice sought to claim space for Black artists and address the erasure and representation of Black Women in the histories of art, the media, and photography. Sulter critically investigated the complex experiences of the African diaspora in European history and culture, producing substantial bodies of work built upon this research.

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About the Institute of Contemporary Arts

The **Institute of Contemporary Arts** (ICA) is London's leading space for contemporary culture. We commission, produce and present new work in film, music, performance and the visual arts by today's most progressive artists. In our landmark home on The Mall in central London, we invite artists and audiences to interrogate what it means to live in our world today, with a genre-fluid programme that challenges the past, questions the present and confronts the future.

The ICA platforms the daring and the curious, supporting artists and ideas that challenge perceptions, inspire social change, and connect with diverse audiences locally and globally. As a space for bold, boundary-pushing creativity, we cultivate connections across disciplines, communities, and cultures. Our cross-disciplinary programming invites audiences to explore beyond the boundaries of individual art forms, fostering experimentation and the discovery of new perspectives. Open to all voices and ideas, we embrace interplay and interaction across club nights, film festivals, gigs, exhibitions, talks, and digital art. With inclusivity and collaboration at the heart of our work, we remain fearless in shaping contemporary creativity, connecting diverse voices, and making unexpected connections that define the future of arts and culture.

Our history of presenting and promoting visionary new art is unrivalled in London: from Kenneth Anger to Kathy Acker, Kano to Klein, Jackson Pollock to Jean-Michel Basquiat, Gay Sweatshop to Forensic Architecture, David Bowie to Stormzy, Pop Art to queer techno. Today, as ever, our inclusive programme reflects and represents who we are as a disparate and diverse collection of cultures and identities. Exactly 78 years after a group of artists and poets founded the ICA as an alternative to the mainstream, we are committed more than ever to pave the way for the next generation and to platform creative voices. The ICA continues to celebrate risk and champion innovation, and experimentation across the arts – a playground and a home for today's most vital artists. Central to the ICA's vision and mission is a commitment to diversity, equality, and inclusion at all levels of the organisation. We want to create and maintain an ICA that is a positive environment where similarities and differences of people are valued – a space where everyone belongs and feels welcome. We hold ourselves accountable through our regularly reviewed Anti-Racism Strategic Plan; Equality and Diversity Policy and Action Plan; and Safety Policy. Since its inception, the ICA has been the home of future-thinking ideas and urgent cultural discourse. We are committed to fostering a diverse and inclusive environment that encourages dialogue and debate, recognising that differing viewpoints are essential to the advancement of contemporary arts and culture.

The ICA is an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation.

Access

If you have an access requirement that we can assist you with, please contact us in advance of your visit for more information at access@ica.art and we will make our best endeavours to help you. Full venue accessibility information can be found here, and you can download an accessibility map of the venue at ica.art/media/01795.pdf

Press Enquiries

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To download press images, visit [ICA's Dropbox](#)

Visitor Information

Tickets: £7.50 full price
Pay What You Can operates from 12 – 1pm every day
Members go free

Exhibition opening times:

Monday: Closed, Tue to Sun: 12pm – 9pm