

Museums Journal



Fight the power Does this exhibition go where other galleries fear to tread?

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From where I'm standing

**Why doesn't any
UK venue want this
inspiring exhibition?**



Felicity Heywood

The experience was so good I had to go back a second time. It was rare for an exhibition to speak to me, as an African, in a way that was intellectual and drew on a period of history where resistance and self-determination were central to the story.

Yes, I am referring to the Emory Douglas: Black Panther Party exhibition, which is still running at Urbis in Manchester. And yes, I gave it the thumbs up in a review in last month's Museums Journal. But there is more to be said.

In the UK, people of African descent are starved of access to their past through coherent exhibitions such as the one at Urbis. Museums are full of African artefacts and have galleries dedicated to the subject, but the stories that many of the objects tell need to be pieced together by visitors, who may come with few tools to do so.

I am happy that the European trade of enslaved Africans is a permanent fixture in select museums – but it is the obvious suspect – largely told as a story of subjugation by the British empire.

On my second visit to the Emory Douglas exhibition, I discovered some like-minded people. Visitors, mainly Mancunians, who were coming back again, with delight on their faces to see their stories told. I say their stories for good reason. African Brits are more likely to relate to African American history than the history of Manchester or Leeds.

But it's not just African Brits who have delighted in this exhibition. The figures speak for themselves. Urbis reports that it is on schedule to become its second-most visited show (it closes on 19 April). And Sharon Heal, the editor of Museums Journal, said it is one of the best exhibitions she has seen in a long time.

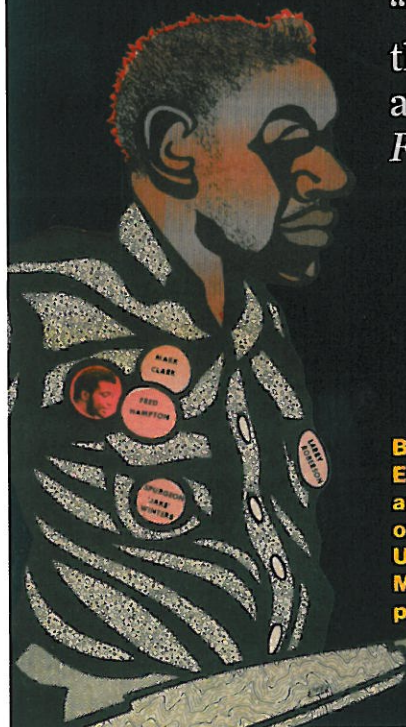
An extension to the exhibition looks out of the question but Urbis hasn't given up on the show touring. So far, no UK museum has come forward. Why? London is an obvious choice. It would be perfect for a venue such as the Victoria and Albert Museum. It would be a sure-fire winner and bring in new audiences too.

Oriel Kyffin
Williams,
Anglesey: p50



Reviews

"Emory Douglas's cartoons helped the illiterate understand the Black Panther's message. The party introduced the verbal and pictorial use of pigs and rats for police and politicians"
Felicity Heywood on Urbis's Emory Douglas exhibition



**Black Panther
Emory Douglas
and the Art
of Revolution,
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Temporary exhibition
Black Panther Emory Douglas
and the Art of Revolution,
Urbis, Manchester

Is this the most explosive exhibition of recent years? Urbis deserves praise for doing it, says *Felicity Heywood*

The European debut of works by the “revolutionary artist” has come to Urbis in Manchester. It’s a surprise that Emory Douglas, a prolific artist and former minister of culture for the Black Panther Party (1966-1982), whose uncompromising graphics are politically thunderous, has never had a show outside the US.

And why Urbis? It can’t be just the stunning artworks that would sell well to the press and to young politicians keen to get their hands on reproductions of Douglas’s work on T-shirts and prints.

Urbis’s purpose is to examine and explore city life through the culture and experiences of its people. The Black Panther Party (BPP) for Self Defense (as it was initially called), was started in Oakland, California, by activist Huey Newton, who aimed to empower ordinary African Americans in the face of

concentrated and persistent police brutality.

Early on, the exhibition states that Manchester’s own past labour struggles are one of the reasons for Urbis hosting the show. But Manchester is not mentioned again and perhaps this is wise: to do so would seem forced. It may have been better to leave the statement out altogether.

Forgetting the link with Manchester, this exhibition covers the entire first floor at Urbis and is a thorough look at the social and political world that led to the formation of the BPP and the social and political network created by the party. Emory Douglas joined the Black Panthers at the outset and became involved in the Black Community News Service, the newspaper that aimed to correct the mass media coverage of the party. It was newspaper sales that primarily



helped to keep the party afloat. Having trained in commercial art, Douglas’s drawing and cartoons in the paper helped the illiterate understand the message. The party introduced the verbal and pictorial use of pigs and rats for police and politicians to wider America.

Political with a capital P, the first half of the exhibition offers the historical overview of the social, political and economic conditions of African Americans that led to the civil rights campaigns. This section comes with a warning of offensive material and recommends adult companions for the under-16s. I could see why.

There is blown-up image after blown-up image of lynchings, showing how they continued right up to the 1960s and beyond. And just when you think you’ve come to an end of the horror, ▶

Simple and effective: Emory Douglas’s posters, such as *All the Weapons* (above) featured a revolutionary pop art style that was sometimes influenced by the late 1960s psychedelia (right)

Afro-American solidarity
with the oppressed
People of the world



EMORY '68



Above: Emory Douglas's *All Power to the People*. Below: *We Shall Survive, Without a Doubt*

there is more and even a small photograph of a named African American being burned alive in 1908. This was too much. One or two images would have been enough. Urbis's voyeurism recalls the African-American studies strand that psychologically assesses the white people in the lynching pictures who dressed in their Sunday best to view the act.

I turn the corner and gunshots ring out. Footage of infamous political assassinations of the era is the reason for my now-shattered nerves.

Huge wooden blocks, painted in various pastels and primary colours, are arranged into a maze-like structure. Many of the images are blown up as big as the blocks, while slogans, quotes and context are writ large on the walls. More detailed historical information is written clearly on small plaques. The setting fits the drama and gravitas of the subject matter. It is all very well lit and accessible. Out of the first maze is the



second and larger half of the exhibition – the Black Panther Party section, starting with a large space set up as a classroom with BPP voices and messages broadcast from an elevated speaker. African history books, documentary footage and framed photographs of Douglas and other key members of the party fill the mock-classroom.

A filmed interview of Douglas introduces the artist's section. His revolutionary posters show influences ranging from Che Guevara, African studies, and the propagandist art emerging from Vietnam, Cuba and China in the 1960s.

The artist's work is strong enough for an exhibition of its own. The man who said there is no such thing as art for art's sake, that art is for the people, shows powerfully how he used his talent to reflect real social and political concerns. There are close to 60 of Douglas's pictures, original lithographs and cartoons.

Project data

Cost £63,000

Funders Manchester City Council
Curator Pollyanna Clayton Stamm, Urbis

Exhibition design Axis Design
Exhibition ends 19 April 2009

The breadth is apt, as his work reached thousands because it was posted on walls, fences, buildings and apartment blocks to directly address the people. The city itself became his gallery. Douglas's legacy is noted – his influence on artists such as Banksy – as is his contemporary work, which is still based around the African-American community and also the injustices of the US health system.

Urbis has delivered a stunning and information-rich exhibition for Manchester and the UK. It feels almost revolutionary. I can't think of another UK museum that would have taken a chance on an exhibition like this.