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Chapter eight

A post-slavery reading of cotton: Lubaina Himid in conversation with Sabine Broeck and Alice Schmid

Tanzanian-born Lubaina Himid is an artist, writer and curator. Over the past thirty years Himid's creative practice has addressed the legacies of colonialism and historical representations of the African diaspora. Today Himid works across a variety of media, often in response to objects held in museum archives. One of her many areas of textile research is the kanga, explored in *Kangas From the Lost Sample Book* (2012), also discussed by Mr Somebody and Mr Nobody in chapter one. In conversation with German academic Sabine Broeck and her research assistant Alice Schmid, here Himid discusses the place of

beauty in her practice, the reality that creating art is work and the challenges confronting art that deals with the subject of slavery. As Himid explains in this interview, '*Cotton.com*, *The Dinner Service*, *Naming the Money*, any of those large-scale installations ... made up of a hundred pieces: none of it was a labour of love. Making work is not a pleasurable thing ... The point about making a hundred was absolutely to try to imagine what it's really like to work ... To have to work until the job's done.'

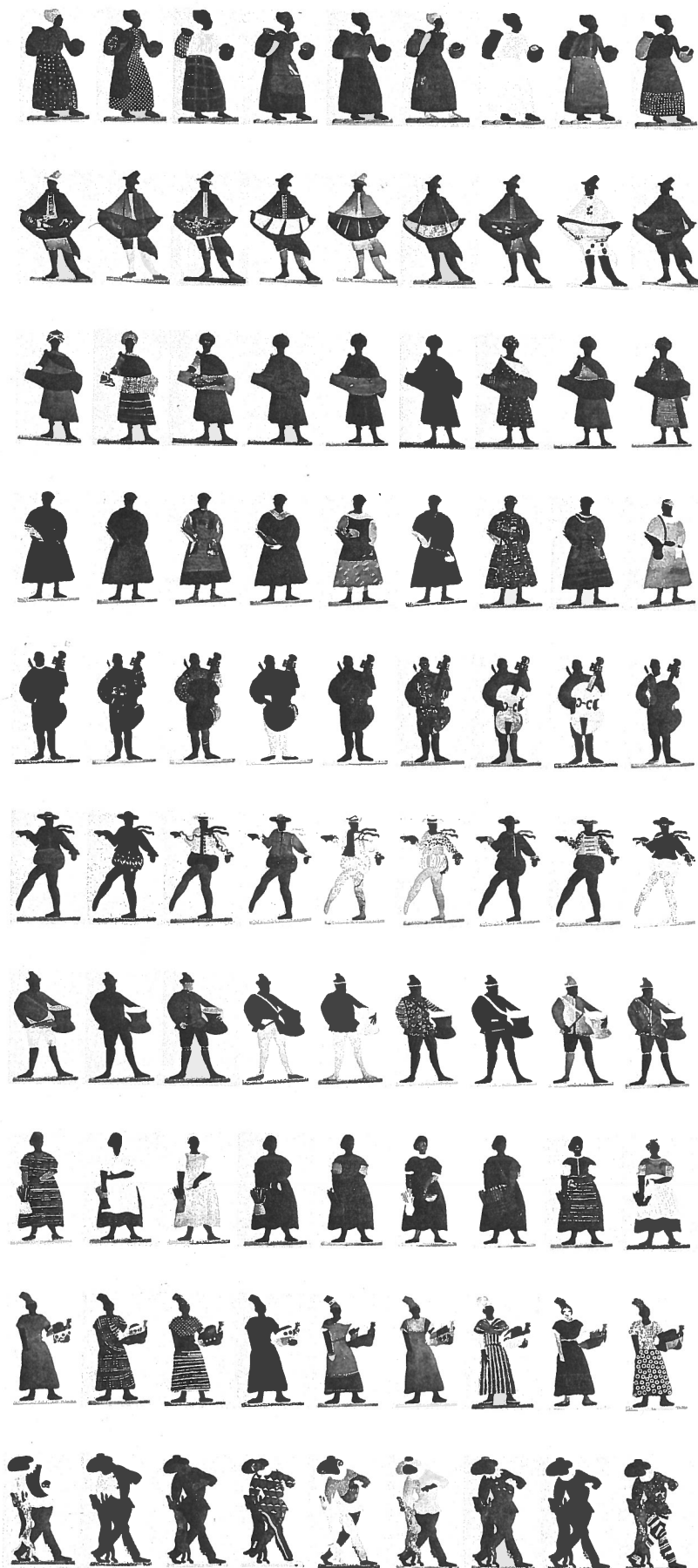
Jessica Hemmings

SABINE BROECK AND ALICE SCHMID: Could there be such a thing as a particularly postcolonial craft? What would that imply about colonial craft? Is it political, or could it be an aesthetic feature?

LUBAINA HIMID: I think that it would have to be a political feature. I can't see that you could lump something together and call it particularly that; there could easily be a way of doing things or a way of thinking about ideas that would thread through pieces of work. When I think of the artists that I work with, you know, we were pursuing many of the same sorts of ideas, but each was so utterly different from the others. I can't see that it's anything to do with how it looks.

SB / AS If one attends to the wordplay in crafting the postcolonial, it entails quite some power for the making of craft, or the act of crafting, to create, or at least creatively impact on, a specific cultural, political and social moment: that of the postcolonial. Does this mean in turn maybe that this moment, of the postcolonial, has turned out to be particularly welcoming to craft, as opposed to being made into 'Art' (capital A)? Or is that one of those dubious binaries, which artists such as yourself, and others, want to undercut?

LH For a younger artist than me, this kind of dividing art and craft doesn't make any sense. If crafting is the care in the making, and art is the care in the thinking – they still blur. But the postcolonial as welcoming to craft? How would that show itself?



Lubaina Himid, *Naming the Money*, 2003. Composite image first exhibited at the Hatton Gallery, Newcastle, England (17 January to 13 March 2004). Photograph by Denise Swanson.

SB / AS Maybe because of the material, the materiality that we associate with colonialism, like particular materials, cotton or sugar, for example.

LH Yes, but when I make work, I just know what the material to make it with is. I don't think the crafting of it through to the end. Sometimes you need to come at the idea with materials from the left field. I make with very little thought about the materials with which I'm making.

SB / AS So you don't start with the idea of cotton, for example, or a particular material, you start with the idea and then you know which material to take?

LH That's it absolutely. I ask: How could I make the idea seductive, or how can I make the idea playful, or how can I make the idea work in this place, or this site, or with these museum objects? It will always be like that. That's not to say everyone works that way, but that really is how I work.

SB / AS The radiance of your work has puzzled us: it so recklessly risks the beautiful. Would you want to insist on a momentum, an urgency of beauty implied by your work?

LH Well, it's interesting this idea of beauty. When you say my work 'risks the beautiful', does this mean that it is beautiful but it tries to throw this beauty away? It is beautiful, because I'm trying to lure you towards it, to imply that I'm addressing particular issues, inviting you to a dialogue, but a brain dialogue. You as the viewer are supposed to act on that dialogue, so it's beautiful only so that you don't come into the room and go out again. So you come into the room and want to play or want to talk ... It's never been designed to be beautiful so that you admire it ... I'm not going to make something that's harmonious. There is a sort of unease, a dis-ease in the work, which is why I would dispute the beauty in the work. It's not beauty in the sense of harmony. It might be beauty in the sense of seduction, but not of a fabulous vista that disappears. It definitely is not that sort of beauty. But it is the glimpse of say, orange

with turquoise, which might make you go a bit nearer the work than if it was grey and brown.

SB / AS I was wondering what would be the function of such visual beauty in relation to your kinds of subjects, like slavery, colonial monumentalism, or the black diasporic experience?

LH Well, if you really want to make work about this subject there is no point in making purposefully ugly work – whatever that means – because the subject is already ugly. You could never be as ugly as the subject itself. You could never be as ugly as the hold of a ship, or branding, or rape, or blood-stained bodies, so you couldn't achieve that. If you're going to talk about it and change it, you have to use some other manner or means. I would dispute the notion of beauty. It's rather an ability to know how to make people stop long enough near the work to either see themselves in it, or to see something in it that reminds them of something that they do know. But it isn't the beauty of a nineteenth-century painting. And, so I don't feel any difficulty making work like that, because I want you to talk about the subjects within it.

SB / AS Would you say that there is a movement among contemporary black diaspora artists (if one might be allowed the categorization for a minute) to work through, and with, beauty, with allure, with pleasantness, as opposed to rather more explicit politically framed kinds of realism, which might call this a dangerous indulgence?

LH I thought about Ellen Gallagher or Chris Ofili when you asked this question, but I don't think these particular contemporary black diaspora artists are dealing with facile beauty either, or harmony or pleasantness. There is this kind of beauty on the one hand, seduction on the other hand, and a kind of unease in the middle. It's an engagement and discussion with an audience and then a disrupting of that. It is certainly far from a more obviously 'political' kind of aesthetic, as for example in past forms of social realism. Much of the time in the art gallery you are addressing an audience that you haven't necessarily made the work for.



Lubaina Himid, *Naming the Money (dog trainers)* (detail), 2003. Paint, collage, wood, sound. First exhibited at the Hatton Gallery, Newcastle, England.



Lubaina Himid, *Naming the Money (dog trainers)* (detail)
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 Hatton Gallery, Newcastle,
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In British art galleries the proportion of African or African-Caribbean audiences are much smaller than European white audiences. Very often when you have lots of African [or] African-Caribbean viewers of the work, they are small children who have come to experience an art gallery with their school. So a lot of the time you're trying to talk to an audience about what action they might take as white Europeans with this work. This is a bit of a challenge, because when you're making it – when I'm making it – I'm talking to the black women that I know. There's a necessity to make work that will stop people in their tracks and allow them to feel that they can have a conversation.

SB / AS What about the aspect of love, as in labour of love, in the production of, say, *Cotton.com*, which must have been a haunted love, railed by Cotton (capital C) that haunts on the side of the viewer? We have had a feeling of sensuous affection for your work, and the immediate desire to touch it, to get closer to its colours, its dimensionality, boldness and wit. And then that affection gets stuck in one's throat, because of the distance one feels to the object or topic in question, as in *cotton*. Have viewers, but also your students at Central Lancashire, problematized similar questions with you? What kind of debates have you had about this after *Cotton.com*, and *Naming the Money*, but also *The Dinner Service* exhibition, and the *Jelly Moulds*?

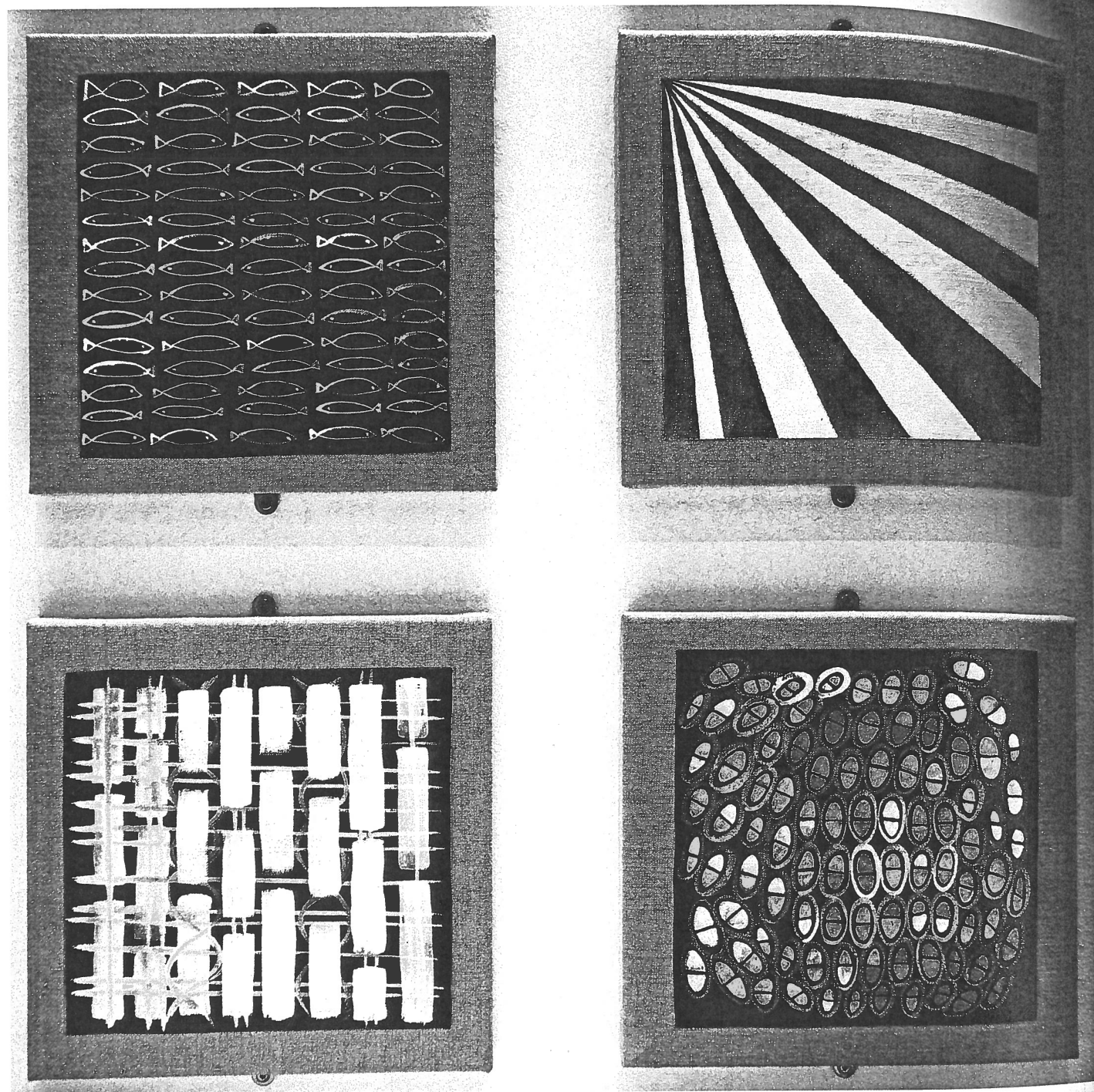
LH *Cotton.com*, *The Dinner Service*, *Naming the Money*, any of those large-scale installations, if you like, are made up of a hundred pieces: none of it was a labour of love. Making work is not a pleasurable thing. It's torturous. The point about making a hundred was absolutely to try to imagine what it's like to really work. You know, to really work. To have to work until the job's done. With all those projects I was trying to imagine what it's like to be inside the place where the task is more enormous than you can bear – than you think you can cope with – and to try to generate, in the making, a sense of being overwhelmed by the enormity of it all, and the impossibility of it all. In a sense I needed to punish myself, in a way, if I was going to understand how you survive beyond

enslavement, even if your body doesn't survive beyond enslavement. If your people survived beyond it, you have to understand what it's like to be in it, and to try and make the work be the place where you come up with strategies for getting beyond it. It was a method of keeping going. I didn't want to get run over by a bus until I had finished the task.

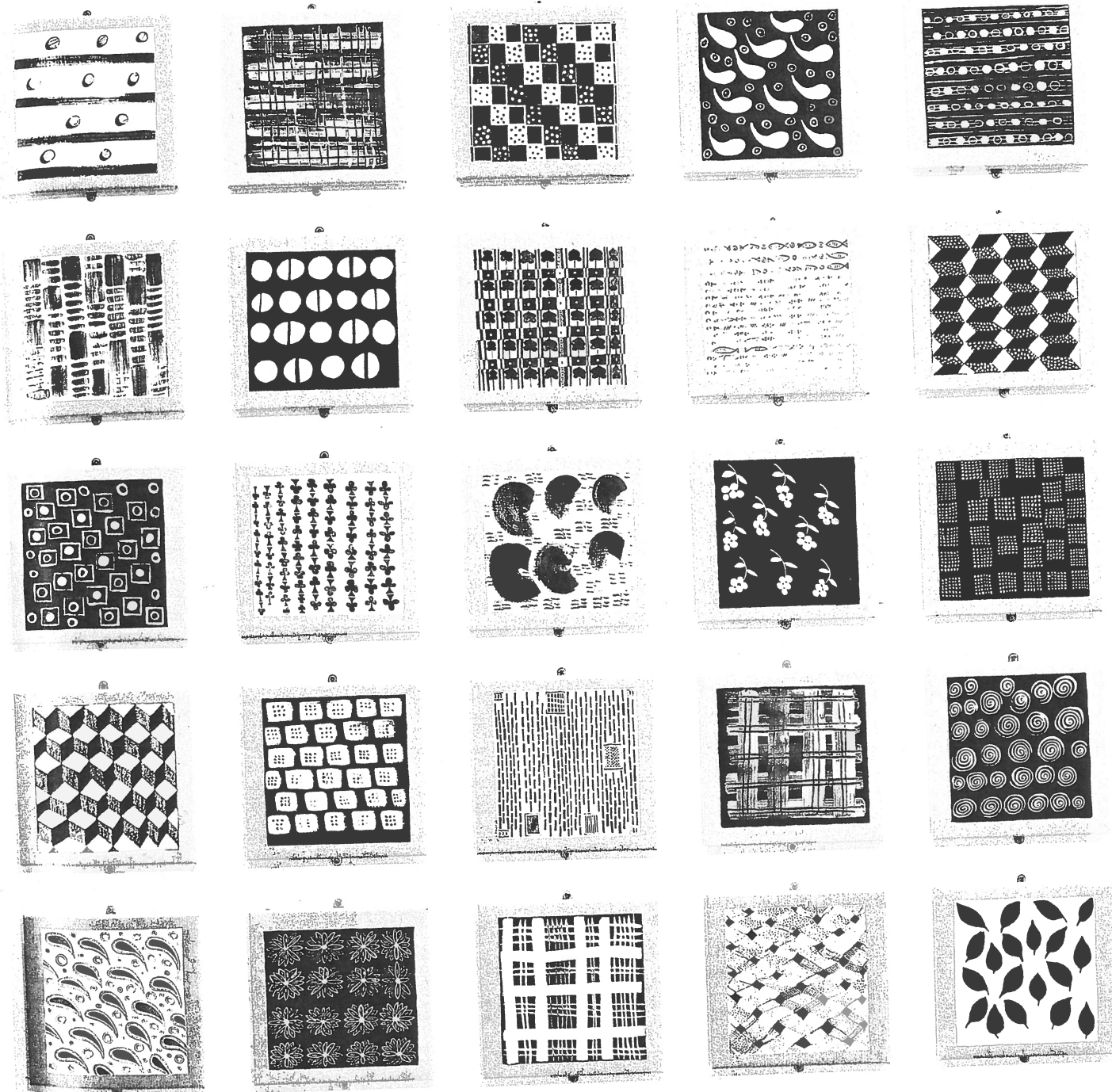
SB / AS We've got these questions that are to do with *Cotton.com* and its basis in that particular material, that particular textile. Why make cotton beautiful?

LH Well, I didn't think I was making it beautiful. I was trying to make an installation that was overwhelming, and would give the viewer a sense of unease and displacement. When the work was shown, it was shown in the gallery that used to be a showroom for fabric, and the square paintings, a hundred of them, kind of started at the ground and went up the wall and into nooks and crannies, and you had to strain your body, really, to be able to see them. And you couldn't see them all at once. The text that went with them was behind you. So all the time you were looking at the work the text was behind you. You've got those hundred patterns in black and white – they were either black squares with white patterns, or white backgrounds with black patterns, and you couldn't ever keep your eye still. I wanted there to be a kind of drifting, or a kind of dizziness, or as if ... maybe you felt a bit sick, or as if maybe your glasses weren't at the right prescription ... so, it's much more [than beauty]. Maybe the beauty you might feel if you were on a boat, looking out at water ... it is beautiful, but if you think about how deep that water is, or you think about the kind of blinding light of the sun on it, or if you think about being underwater then it suddenly isn't beautiful anymore. That's what I'm trying to do.

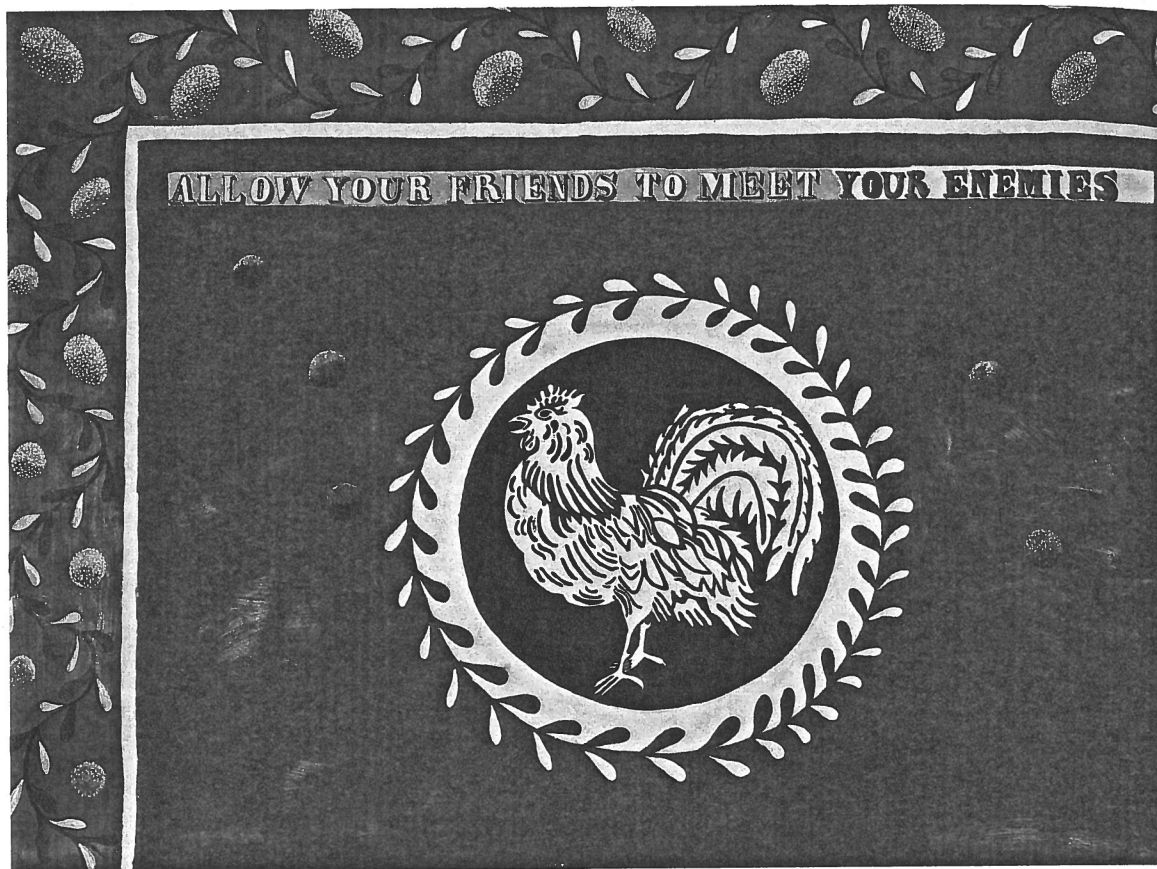
SB / AS If somebody made the argument that the harrowing beauty of your work could be said to 'save cotton' – is that a risk you have run? Or have you devised means to insist on a post-slavery contextualization. If so, how did that work?



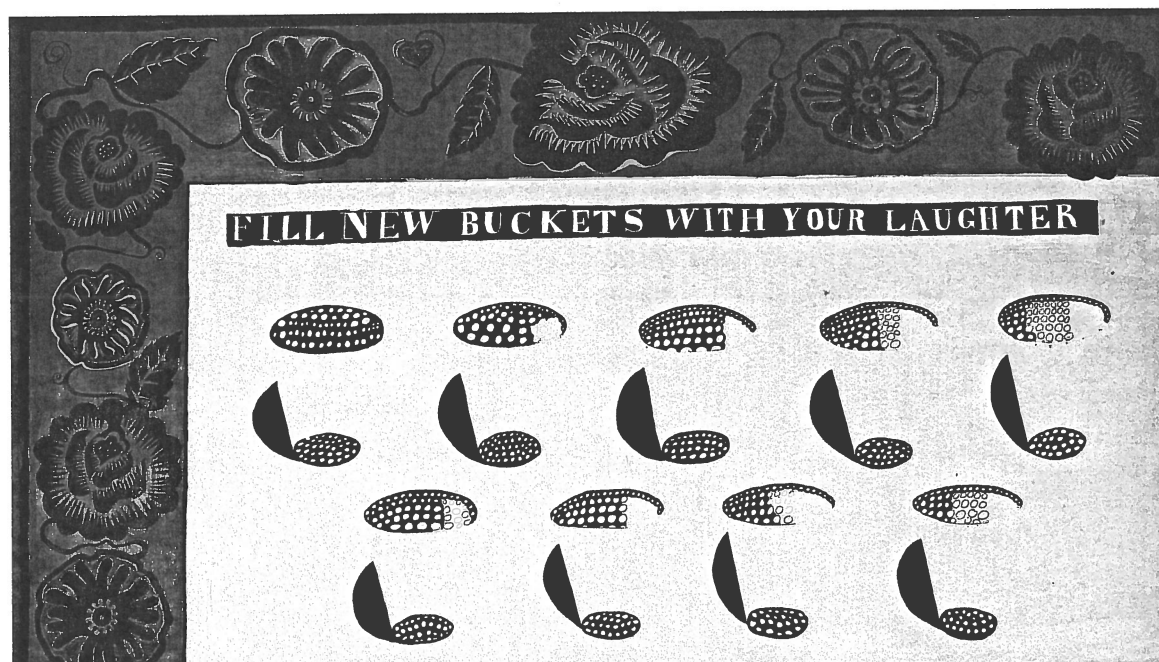
Lubaina Himid, *Cotton.com* (detail), 2002. Acrylic on canvas. Installation at the Fabrications exhibition, CUBE Manchester, England (11 September to 2 November 2002).



Lubaina Himid, *Cotton.com* (detail),
2002. Acrylic on canvas. Installation
at the Fabrications exhibition, CUBE
Manchester, England.



Lubaina Himid, *Kangas from the Lost Sample Book: Allow Your Friends to Meet Your Enemies*, 2011–2012. Acrylic on paper. Photograph by Denise Swanson.



Lubaina Himid, *Kangas from the Lost Sample Book: Fill New Buckets with Your Laughter*, 2011–2012. Acrylic on paper. Photograph by Denise Swanson.