

LH I certainly never set out to save it, to redeem it from its past. I don't think it does save cotton. It certainly puts the money involved, gained from that trade, right at the centre of the piece. But yes, if it does save cotton then in a sense it hasn't worked. If you do come out from being in a room with that piece and you can only think about how beautiful it is, and how you want to touch it, and how ... how lovely it is, then it hasn't really worked.

I think that probably depends upon where you see it. It was in a very awkward place in the gallery it was made for, at the bottom of the stairs, and then it sort of shot up the wall right next to those stairs. I've shown it where it's been at the end of a long gallery space; a hundred paintings in a perfect grid, with the text running through it. The showing of it needs to be a little more thought through ... it was quite thought through the first time, but then after that, I just wanted to make it work in the space. Maybe that means that the conversations people had might have been a bit too easy.

SB / AS How have people responded to the very strong textile quality, the tactility, and the materiality of your work with cotton?

LH I found that fabric pattern, or even motif and text, and those conversations about how fabric speaks, are really some of the most successful things about the work. *Naming the Money* is not really about the fabric, except that all the people are dressed in quite particular ways and they've obviously been very careful about the clothes that they have chosen to wear, so that their clothes are saying something.

This preoccupation probably comes from two things: my mother used to be a textile designer, so pattern and cloth were always part of our conversations. We were always talking about what people were wearing and where they had probably bought their clothes. She could tell how long they'd had a summer dress because she'd know that those colours, or those patterns were last year's model, or the year before, or that they'd bought it new. Those were everyday conversations. In the photographs of my Zanzibari family, most of the women who live there were always dressed in kangas,

these are clothes that are two pieces of fabric with the same pattern and the same text, so I have always been very caught up in the fact that clothing and fabric are speaking a language.

This weaving of words and the weaving of cloth, the printing of text, the printing of pattern, seemed to be at the centre of what I do. So the response is very strong because it's part of people's everyday. Even if they're audiences that go about in jeans and a t-shirt, the t-shirt has probably got some text written on it – you know, some rock concert or some funny text or whatever they've chosen to wear that morning. They've chosen to wear a tartan jacket or chosen to wear a red jumper, and they've understood – even if they haven't understood in the front of their brain – that textile is a language and that you can speak to people without speaking. You're using clothes and fabric to say something about yourself.

SB / AS In *Kangas from the Lost Sample Book*, however, you choose to use paper over textile?

LH What I tried to achieve was a connection to the materiality of the sample book. So what they were supposed to be were kangas from the lost sample book – they were samples, not actually kangas. I was making reference to kangas, obviously, but I was also making reference to the sample books – hundreds and thousands of which were thrown out and put into skips and into dustbins when the Manchester print studios came to the end of their lives in the 1960s. So many of the designs that were actually created for these West and East African textiles in the studios of Manchester were lost. The evidence of that creativity, along with all the paisleys and stripes and the rest of it, was thrown away in these sample books. Because I made the work for the Whitworth [Art Gallery] in Manchester, using some kangas from my collection and some from theirs, I was making a kind of Manchester-specific reference to those lost sample books to acknowledge the loss. Also, I felt I could convey the power of the designs better on paper than going into the print room to print kangas directly. I couldn't have achieved the intended effect that well with printed cloth.

SB / AS Do you see differences between *Cotton.com* and your later work with textile?

LH Yes, I do. *Cotton.com* is undoubtedly firmly rooted in the questions I ask about slavery, about being enslaved, about how to deal with that, survive that, strategize for resistance. The later textile work is much more rooted in what it's like to be an African woman in another place, a place that is our home today. The later work is much less about forced displacement, about commodification, than it is about simply trying to belong. Or about trying to connect to a given locale, or – as a diasporic artist – trying to be two people, in two places at once; and much less about past enslavement.

SB / AS Coming back to the 'crafting': there are so many layers of crafting, and so many different 'crafts' in the very word cotton and what it evokes, in the (post)enslavement colonial history of cotton, in the black labour and white profit of the making of cotton, in the travelling of cotton through time and space.

How is it that you arrived at making *Cotton.com*, at 'crafting' such a condensed abstraction? Does this imply that the memory of enslavement, and its ongoing urgency for today's societies should best be crafted into a memorable form, instead of into images that always run the risk of arousing the abolitionist empathy that Marcus Wood has criticized as pornographic?

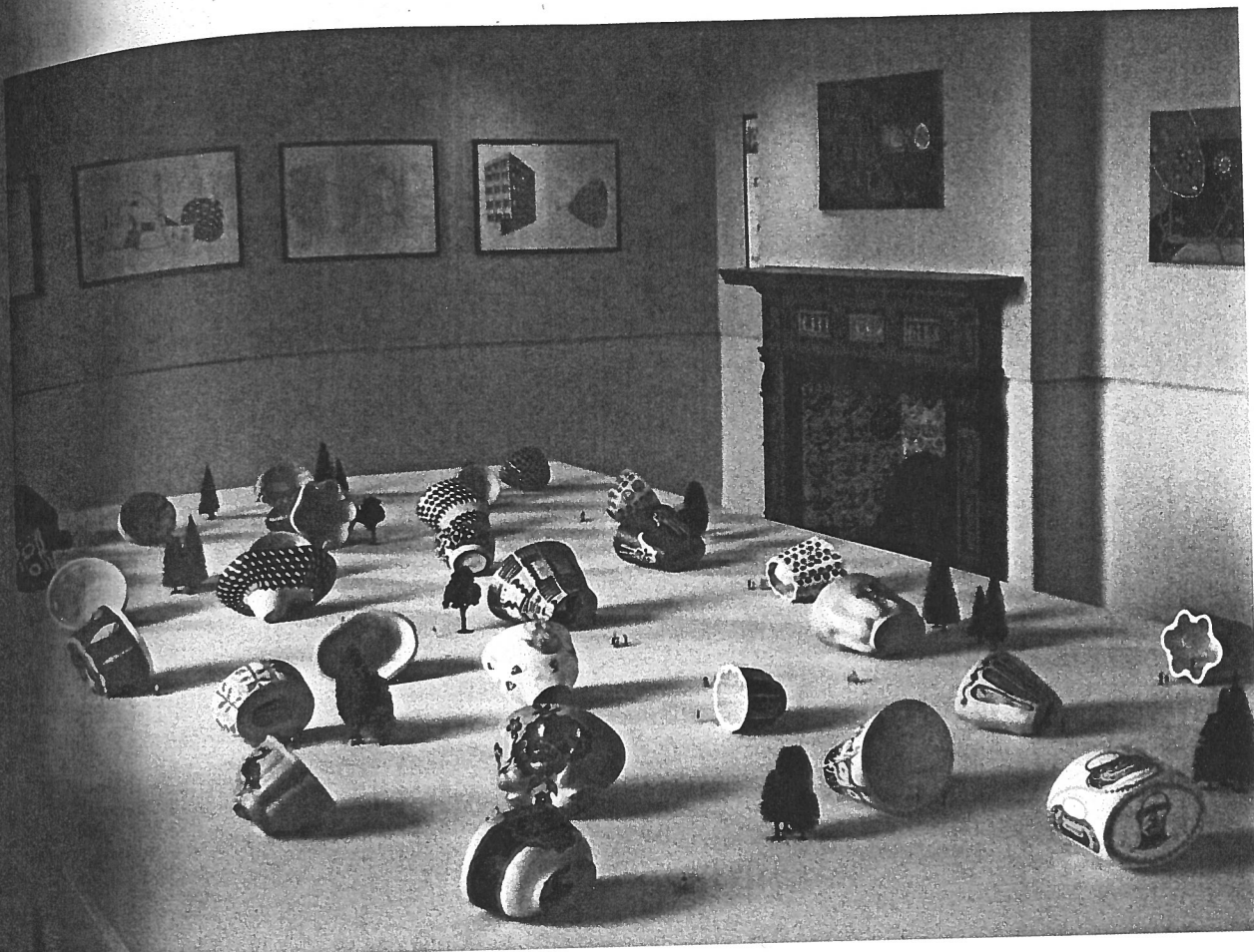
LH Yes, I think that's key. My whole practice is about how to talk about this without just plainly re-showing it; as I said earlier, you cannot paint anything uglier than rape or branding. I've never been able to see the point of putting work like that into an art gallery. Twenty-five African people, African-Caribbean people, come in – why would you want those people to re-experience that in such a way? Why would you want any one of these communities to be observed experiencing something like that in a public place? I think that pornographic is absolutely the right phrase for that kind of work, it simply re-presents the horror and then expects that horror, in this facile way, to be made impossible for the future. It simply repeats it.

There are people who are going to get some kind of, perhaps not pleasure from it, but some kind of desire to keep looking at it, and for it to be shown again and again. You as a viewer have within you all sorts of understandings about pain and all sorts of understandings about your body, and you don't need a painting to hand violence to you on a plate. You have to be able to engage with a piece of art and imagine yourself in it, without that kind of prodding.

SB / AS So you would agree with Wood's notion of empathy as being to some extent pornographic in itself? So that seeing a picture of a whipped body and imagining that it must have been terrible, and trying to sort of feel this pain, which is inaccessible, becomes a mere titillation of the viewer?

LH Yes. Those paintings of African enslaved women hung up in a tree being whipped, in British abolitionist cartoons to make people feel the tragedy of it – that is exactly the same thing as the 1960s and 1970s idea of putting starving Africans on the television with flies all around them, so we would feel terribly sorry for them, and give money. Yes, I think you would feel terribly sorry and you would give your money. It's not that it doesn't work; it's just that it gives no dignity, no humanity, no intelligence to the black person in the image. It might work as an effective pressure to make people give money, but showing those images did not give the onlooker any idea of what it meant to be that person. We are more than our tragedy, and more than our pain. We're still somebody's daughter, somebody's friend and somebody's lover, somebody with a life. This kind of empathy takes away your somebody-ness. If you condense experience into an aesthetic, even abstracted form, the viewer must relate to it cognitively, and perhaps feel differently vis-à-vis the subject of that piece of art.

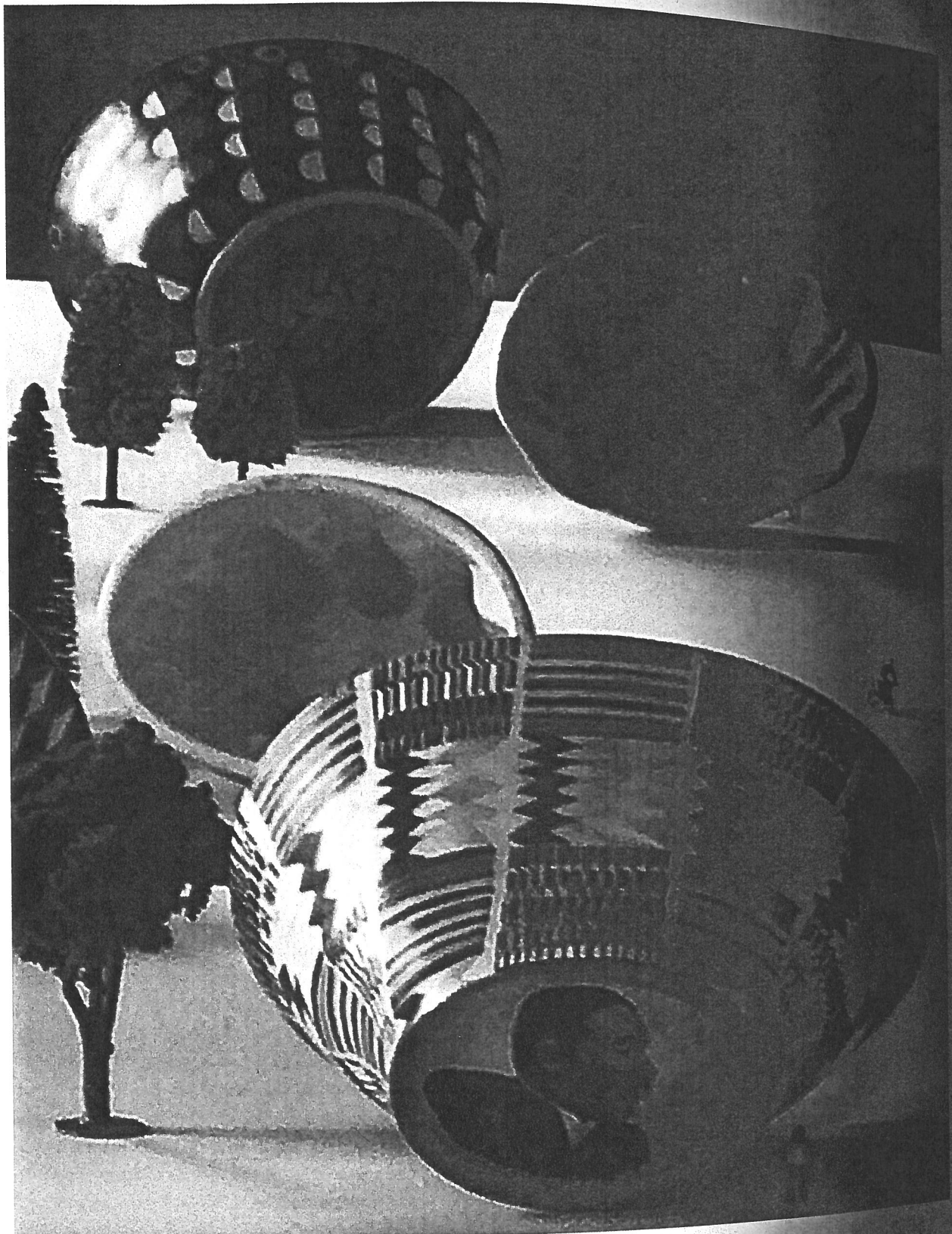
SB / AS What has always appealed to us about your work starting with *A Thin Black Line* and *Naming the Money* is this brazen turn to crafting in the margins, as it were, to supplement (as in: add to and in the process, alter) the substance (topically and materially) of the objects you engage with.



Lubana Himid, *Jelly Mould Pavilions*, 2009–10. Acrylic on Victorian ceramic jelly moulds. Installation at Sudley House, Liverpool, England (27 March to 6 June 2010).

Would you say there is a turn in your work away from the mode of visualized abstraction in *Cotton.com* to later work, and why might this be so? Is there an affective interest in jelly moulds, that you chose not to show for cotton? Do you see a productive tension in your work between abstraction and concreteness of objects? Like moving from the condensation of *Cotton.com* to the tender look at concrete and, as it were, 'found' detail, 'found' material, in the newspaper project, but also the jelly moulds? Is this a move from abstraction to another mode, and which one would that be?

LH The ideas I'm trying to explore are not special. They're ordinary. They're about our lives now, how we are as people now, today in this space; using found objects, found things like newspapers, or dishes, to jolt the memory of a viewer. All the work is to remind you of what you already know, or already feel. I'm not ever really telling you something you don't know. I'm reminding you of something that you know already. Sometimes the problem of painting on canvas is that it seems like a special thing that belongs in a grand place, that is for other people, not for the average person. It's a beautiful way of working, but sometimes if you want to make connections to communities, then you need to use a found thing because I want to say 'if



Lubaina Himid, *Jelly Mould Pavilions* (detail), 2009–10. Acrylic on Victorian ceramic jelly moulds. Installation at Sudley House, Liverpool, England.

I made it, then you could have made it', and 'if you made it then how would you do it?', and 'why did I make it like that?' Whereas if it's a painting then you might say: 'Oh, I could never do that, I don't do art.' And that's not the sort of conversation I want to have with my audiences. I want to say, 'we're the same people, and there's a chance here for us to have some conversations, be playful with what I've done ... come amongst it – it's not separate from your shopping, or different from your music-making, or that activity you do with your friends on Tuesdays, it's the same thing.'

I do show much more in museums, in places where it is possible to interrupt the reading of objects, rather than in an art gallery where they want to present an object as itself, to be read as itself. I guess that's why my work shifted from one kind of material to another: I want to see if I can make it funnier or whether I can make it less durable, or whether I can make it more playful, or whether I can make it more precious. For example, with *Kangas from the Lost Sample Book*, these were pieces of paper in frames, but I was trying to get across that this was something not just about the now and the everyday, but something lost, something thrown away, or something gone. 'Things thrown away and lost' is very much the average experience for many people.

If you make work for long enough, you come round again. So yes, for some of the things that I did in *The Dinner Service* or the *Jelly Moulds*, I was using particular objects, over-painting them, painting a history, painting another one on the top, making you think about the period that those objects had come from, and telling the story that isn't being told in a plain jelly mould or in those particular dinner plates. *Jelly Pavilions* for Liverpool is very different from *Cotton.com* in terms of its layering, and abstraction. It was less serious, it was a much more jokey, ironical piece, and it's the same with *The Dinner Service*, it's much less serious – there are vomiting toffs, and figures taken from British cartoons of the time. It's completely different from *Cotton.com*, where there was much more a desire to convey this sense of being enslaved, a sense of unease and danger.

With *The Dinner Service*, the fact that black people's figures and faces were painted on the tureens and the jugs meant that there was a sense of embodiment.

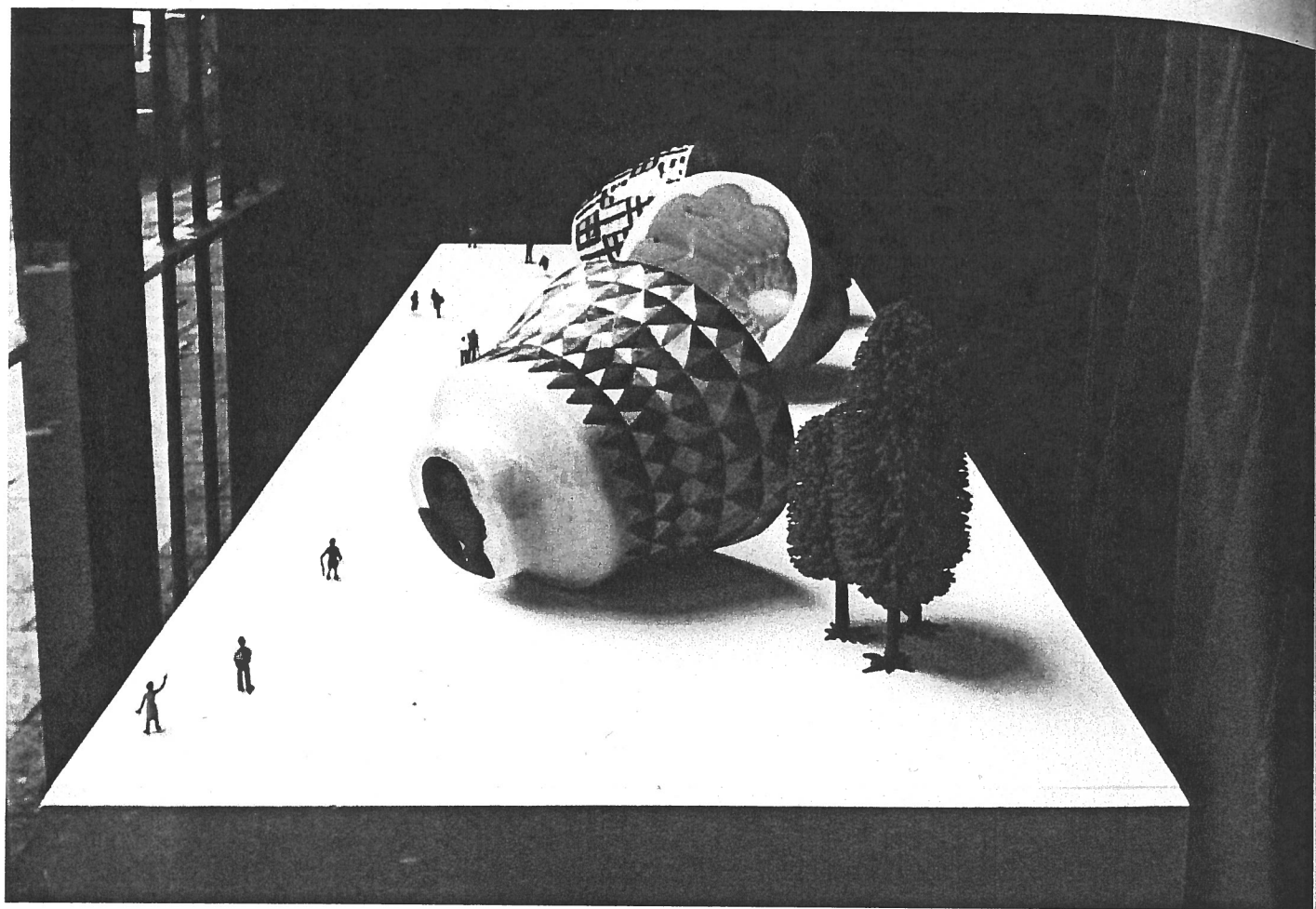
What I'm doing now is sort of moving back to some of the things I was trying to do with *Cotton.com*, in that I'm making a series of shelves, very plain wooden shelves, but they're hung at a height so that only by leaning against the wall can you look up and see patterns; the whole shelf is painted with patterns. A combination of toiles de Jouy and kanga patterns; a kind of crashing of European pattern and the history of European pattern, colliding with African pattern.

Some of those things that you might experience when *Cotton.com* was hung how it should be, where it was awkward to look at, that looking up and feeling dizzy, that trying to get back far enough, then not being able to see it all at once, is revisited in this new work. It will be difficult again to see the work without placing your body in an awkward place, and there is this coming together, this colliding of a European pattern and an African pattern. I've come around to pattern, I guess. I moved away from it, and I've found it again.

SB / AS I'd also like to ask you about the relationship between visual material and text in your work. What is the function of writing in pieces such as *Cotton.com* and *Naming the Money*? Was this ever met with resistance by viewers who protest about 'being told what to think'?

LH I don't care in the slightest about any kind of resistance. Text doesn't tell the audience what to think, but it does tell you, the audience, what the artist thinks. That's what I'm doing, I'm telling you what I think, and I'm hoping that you think some of the same, but probably something different. At least we can have some kind of a conversation.

Quite often when I've put text in work as I have in the text and image works in *Plan B*, for instance, or as I have in *Naming the Money* written on the back of the cut-outs, I'm giving you two pieces of art at once. So that if you are the sort of person who wants to read, then you have the chance to make your own picture with the words that I've given you. I see the texts as a chance to speak to the viewer twice, but it is an offer – some people don't want to read, so they don't have



Lubaina Himid, *Jelly Mould Pavilions* (detail), 2009–10. Acrylic on Victorian ceramic jelly moulds. Installation at Jacksons Art Shop, Liverpool, England (27 March to 6 June 2010).

to read, they can just engage with the picture. Some people can't read because they never learnt to read, and some people can't read English. So the text is an extra painting if you want it – if you can read it. It is telling you what I think, rather than telling you what you should think.

SB / AS Your work has been used as part of gallery education programmes. What is your opinion of the use of your work in this context?

LH I make a piece of work and then it has its own life and its own use. I am happy if there are groups of people in art galleries who feel they can use a piece of my work to bring out discussions they want to have with either young people, or people who come on educational days. If it can be used in that way then

that is more than fine. So many of the pieces of work were made as political tools – so if they're used in that way then that's probably better than if they were in their own white space alone with no label, with people simply admiring them for their loveliness. That would be kind of sad, and useless.

There are plenty of artists who are deeply insulted by being used in education programmes. They just happen to be Africans or African-Americans, and they want to make work about whatever they want to make work about. To have it categorized, packaged, as in 'they made it this way because they are black' is insulting for them. The discussions around my work are supposed to revolve around the politics of representation, and the politics of what it's like to function in this dysfunctional setting that is our postcolonial world.

SB / AS How does postcolonial thinking, particularly about hybrid cultural identities and contemporary migration, inform recent textile practice?

LH My work is part of all those discussions. I have been trying to represent one part of myself – the African part of myself – and have it speak to the English part of myself, by using pattern and by using textiles. The very essence of it, especially when I'm using patterns, or if I think about the use of textiles, is the question of how to reconcile the different impacts from the two cultures. These are hybrid pieces of work. Quite often they're made from several parts that do communicate, but historically they were not always meant to come into conversation. They have entangled histories, but those histories are not really always talked about so as to see the connections.

I am of both those worlds. My mother is English and my father came from Zanzibar to England to University College, met my mother who was at art school at the Royal College of Art. They went back to Zanzibar, which was a British protectorate at the time, and very soon after I was born, [my] father died from malaria, and so my mother came home and brought me with her. I am completely enmeshed in that kind of individual and collective conversation – in that challenge of being neither one thing nor the other, but being both things.

SB / AS Does contemporary textile practice engage with the themes of postcolonial thinking more frequently than other craft disciplines; if so, can the physical portability of the textile explain the connection?

LH Interesting question. Personally, one of my passions is ceramics, whether it's tiles or the use of found ceramics, and painting on top of them – the only reason I am painting on top of them is because I don't know how to make ceramic pieces of the same quality. If I knew how to do it, if I'd spent the years honing that craft, I would have done it.

But to your question: I think one can have really interesting conversations with and about textiles and the way they thread, if you like, through the everyday. The same sorts of conversations you can have about ceramics – if you take that broad notion of ceramics, everyday ceramics from tiles and bricks to plates and jugs. For me, textiles are one perfect medium to make visual metaphors for all the things I'm interested in, like a kind of wrapping oneself in the textile, which can make a connection with the body, with all stages of life, really.

I'm not somebody who weaves. I'm not somebody who even works with fabric. I make work *about* fabric, which I think is an important difference. I am at one remove from making the textile. I didn't make those kanga paintings into kangas, so I don't deal with the fabric itself ... I re-imagine the fabric, really.

SB / AS Does the longstanding relationship between textile scholarship and feminist thinking help explain the particular interest of contemporary textile practitioners with ideas of the postcolonial?

LH I would think so. North American and European feminists were almost totally responsible for women artists being able to bring anything into the art gallery, and to be able to have discussions about the mundane in the art gallery. The way that they did it was very often with the stuff of the everyday, which was often made of textiles, whether it was clothes or other things. They broke down so many barriers and allowed a different way of showing and different conversations about what could be art and what was craft, blurring the edges of it, using textiles so many times to do it. Performative artist weavers [contributed] – quite often designers who had turned themselves into artists – there were also graphic designers or textile designers, not always trained as fine artists. There's an inextricable link between feminist art practice, textiles and the opening up of the art gallery to allow many, many more people in as artists. This couldn't have been done without them. So this opening then in turn also enabled access for postcolonial issues.