

Black Intentions

In 1920s Paris, negrophilia was all the rage, with black performers forced to play up to stereotypes created by white audiences. Today, **Petrine Archer-Straw** asks, is Chris Ofili doing the same thing?



Not so black and white after all. Above, Johnny Hudgins in a scene from Jean Renoir's film *Sur un Air de Charleston*, 1926

The black-faced minstrel is a well-established, though somewhat dubious, character in the history of Western popular theatre. In 19th-century America, even before black people began performing for white audiences, whites blackened their own faces to provide entertainment in circuses and theatres. The black-faced banjo-playing minstrel allowed whites to laugh at their negative characteristics under the guise of blackness. Later, black people's mimicry of these acts in vaudeville and European music halls continued their roles as jesters and entertainers. In 1920s Paris, Josephine Baker's performances – with her facial contortions and goofing around – seemed iconic of black culture and allowed whites to laugh at human frailty without having to compromise their identity. Baker's performances triggered what can be called negrophilia; a craze among artists and bohemian types. It became a sign of being modern and fashionable to collect African art, listen to jazz and dance with black people.

The idea that whites and blacks might exchange roles to gain greater insight about themselves has not been limited to the theatre. An examination of photographs and portraits of blacks and whites in the 1920s shows that a desire for otherness and racial difference was an aspect of the primitivized lifestyles cultivated by Paris's avant-garde. Their negrophilia was not just about fun and frolic, it also had a cutting edge that critiqued Western values in ways that are still relevant. It is interesting to compare their concerns with those of a contemporary artist like Chris Ofili, to show how debates about racial identity still refer to the tradition of minstrelsy and ideas of the primitive.

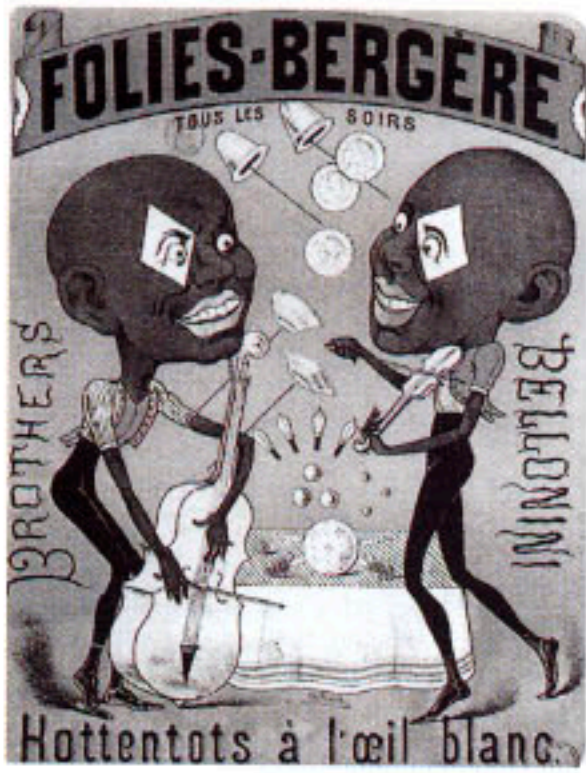
The image of Josephine Baker on the roof of the Champs-Élysées theatre, gawky and cross-eyed, shows the

exaggerated postures involving physical disfigurement and grotesque facial expressions that black people used to entertain white audiences. It was this comic act that helped Baker out of the chorus line of *La Revue Nègre*, the black musical that took avant-garde Paris by storm in 1925. In that music-hall revue she played to the audience's racial difference with jokes like "I may be a dark horse, but you'll never be a black mare." Once noticed, however, Baker was groomed as Baudelaire's "black Venus". Her erotic pseudo-African dancing, choreographed by André Daven and documented by Paul Colin in his portfolio *Le Tumulte Noir*, earned her the admiration of artists such as Léger, Picabia, Van Dongen, Picasso and Calder who would all seek her out as model and muse. Baker was expected to act out notions of blackness that were more to do with white fantasies rather than any black reality, and her transformation, although remarkable, was superficial.

A few of Paris's bohemians treated negrophilia as more than just a fashion statement and were willing to throw over their European heritage for black culture. Among these were the poet Guillaume Apollinaire, the African-art collector Paul Guillaume, the shipping heiress and publisher Nancy Cunard, and the Surrealist Michel Leiris. Their love of black culture and a "primitivized" existence flourished in the aftermath of World War I and expressed their sympathy for a more idyllic lifestyle removed from the battlefield's mechanized violence. Despite the negative historical implications of being called a "nigger lover", they used names like negrophile and *négrier* almost as terms of endearment to establish their status outside "civilized" society's moral boundaries. Being called a negrophile affirmed their defiant craze for black culture, and "blackness" was a sign of their modernity.

Nancy Cunard was the typical negrophile, a wealthy and reckless flapper who suffered family estrangement and disinheritance because of her obsession with black culture and, in particular, the black jazz musician Henry Crowder. For Cunard, her partner's blackness authenticated her exoticism, and she sported him along with her penchant for khol make-up, African bangles and leopard-skin clothes to underscore her sense of difference. She used to say to him, "Be more African", to which he'd reply, "But I ain't African, I'm American."

Michel Leiris and Georges Bataille, editors of the radical Surrealist journal *Documents*, cultivated an understanding of blackness that was even more extreme than Cunard's. They promoted blackness and other primitivized states involving sexual deviance, magic, ritual practices and cannibalism as a way of critiquing and transgressing the norms of European society. Bataille's concept of "*la bassesse*" – a low or base materialism – challenged the dualism in Platonic thought where the heavenly is ideal, and proposed an alternative where man's "being" is rooted in mud, and where his orifices and bodily functions are more important than his thought-processes. Bataille's extreme anti-idealism advocated a sinister love of darkness and taste for the obscene, that went far beyond other artists' anti-bourgeois manifestos and pranks. It linked



The entertainers. Above, Charles Lévy's poster advertising the Brothers Bellonini's show *Hottentots à l'œil blanc* at the Folies-Bergère, 1885; right, Josephine Baker on the roof of the Champs-Élysées theatre, 1925; below, an illustration from *Documents*, 1930, No. 8

"blackness" with deviance and subversion, and perpetuated a parallel between filth and racial disgust that black people are still confronting. Fittingly, *Documents'* version of the minstrel was black-faced with a leather mask of sadism that implied more sordid forms of entertainment.

This variation on black portraiture is perversely continued in Chris Ofili's *Shithead* (1993), a scatological assemblage of the artist's "dread" locks and elephant dung, that demonstrates that, even 70 years later, the derided image of the black is still being used to critique society by the avant-garde. Even though Ofili is British-born and educated, he parodies his black identity. Like Josephine Baker, Ofili plays the minstrel, but even as he jokes about his own identity he is placing an indictment on others about the travesty that blacks must make of themselves within Britain's mainstream. The same can be said for his paintings. These are multi-layered, exquisite surfaces that shimmer with colour and glamour. Along with their surface brilliance, they exploit the more sensationalized aspects of black culture, especially 1970s black culture, while also arousing deep feelings about the nature of blackness. Ofili's pairing of elephant dung with blackness makes visible long-held sentiments about black deviance and racial disgust in a way that is disturbing, simply because he is black.

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Some critics argue that Ofili and his heavily decorated paintings such as *Afrodizzia* (1996-97) and *Spaceshit* (1996) belong to a black lineage of images and makers such as Jacob Lawrence, James Phillips and Charles Searles. Others praise Ofili for his facility for pastiche and art-historical referencing from Blake to Basquiat. The key to Ofili's imagery may be much simpler, for it is more closely linked to household names like Frank Bruno and Lenny Henry. Ofili is the first visual artist of his race to use Western "black humour" to consistently deconstruct his own personality. His *Captain Shit* (1998) identity is a scathing comment on black bravado and sexual prowess, unrelated to self-conscious promotion of black culture. It is an exploration of "British blackness" at once degrading and infantile in its perusal of his sexuality and race, but at other times instructive about what it is to be perceived as different in Britain. He is able to play out a parody by calling himself "shithead" with tolerance and humour. Because of this, Ofili's paintings present fascinating dichotomies for viewers who ping-pong between the self and the other, between what is perceived as black and what it is to be really black.

Such contradictions and ironies make Ofili's work intellectually teasing and controversial in an art world tired of



its own political correctness. Certainly, there was no escaping outrage when it was featured in the Brooklyn Museum of Art's showing of "Sensation" earlier this year. Among a number of highly provocative and dubious works on show, Chris Ofili's *The Holy Virgin Mary* was the one that New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani singled out for protest on the grounds that Ofili's image of a black Madonna was offensive to devout Catholics. The bulging eyes, protruding lips and exaggerated black physiognomy of the "black Venus", surrounded by butterfly-shaped buttocks and other genitalia clipped from pornographic magazines and rounded off with a decorative dung ball, was considered sacrilegious.

It is a shame that the controversy about Ofili's work centred on religion and Mayor Giuliani's high-handedness rather than triggering introspection about the self-hate and racial offence within such painting. Perhaps inured to its stereotypical imagery, few questioned the racial ridicule implicit in Ofili's characterizations. The fact of the Madonna's blackness was one thing, but the close resemblance to Josephine Baker's own contortions was the joke that Ofili and his followers failed to see. At a time when we are experiencing something of a negrophilia revival, when *Shaft*, hip-hop and the glitz of black glamour are again becoming chic, the reception of Chris Ofili's work needs to be looked at more closely. Like minstrelsy, it is entertainment, but should the audience still be laughing? ❗

For examples of work by Chris Ofili, see "Miro's Heroes on the Wall", page 57.

Petrine Archer-Straw's book, "Negrophilia: Avant-Garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s", is published by Thames & Hudson

