

## EXHIBITION

## All change

Dissolving the boundaries

## MADOC CAIRNS

## Paint Like the Swallow Sings Calypso

KETTLE'S YARD, CAMBRIDGE

**C**ARNIVAL means change. From the Middle Ages to the present day, masked balls to Notting Hill, Venice to Port of Spain, the festival is marked by the dissolution of boundaries: between sacred and profane, private and public, performance and reality. And unsurprisingly, it's always been fertile soil for artists.

Testament to this is *Paint Like the Swallow Sings Calypso*, a new exhibition at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge (to 19 February) that combines the work of three pioneering contemporary Afro-Caribbean artists with older pieces of art. Paul Dash, Errol Lloyd and John Lyons spent their careers crossing boundaries of genre, place and race. Here, boundaries act as pivots, hinges on a door: a space where ideas and influences mix and mutate. Within artworks – and between them.

Dash's ethereal sketches of carnival, based on childhood reflections where he saw his relatives transformed while dancing, sit next to fine-etched depictions of revellers by Dürer. Densely coloured paintings by Errol Lloyd rub shoulders with Ben Nicholson and David Jones, grouped together in clusters and lines; Picasso joins hands with Bruegel the Younger's peasants. Common themes – memory, touch, the mute relatedness of animals – aren't explored so much as incorporated: beats in a melody we can only just make out.

Some notes are picked out more easily than others. For Catholics, carnival marks the tran-



sition from ordinary time into Lent. Historians have posited all kinds of pre-Christian origins for the practice, from Greek bacchanalias to ancient rites of winter banishment. Religion – binding and loosing, sanction and censure – is a constant presence across the exhibition.

One electric sequence sets the tone. In John Lyon's lurid, technicoloured *Crucifixion*, Christ's body is twisted out of recognition, heart tearing out of his chest in a single, frantic movement that connotes to him the elastic passion of carnival, refigured through carnival's gatekeep, the cross. Next to it, Graham Sutherland's *Descent from the Cross* seems inhumanly static, drained of colour.

At first glance – and separately – the pair have nothing to do with carnival. Side by side, they're right at home; speaking to the violence and frailty of embodied emotion, the painful proximity of transience and transcendence.

Errol Lloyd, Notting Hill Carnival – Aztec, 1997

Carnival is an unstoppable of forces and feelings otherwise suppressed. But that suppression remains real. In the exhibition, joy is often shadowed by melancholy, liberation fading as fast as it arrives.

But not always. The exhibition's largest work greets you as you leave – Errol Lloyd's *Notting Hill Carnival* – 24 squares span the length and breadth of the canvas. What unifies the piece isn't a common style but a common sense of movement, of purpose. Freedom captured, but not contained. In the slave societies of the Caribbean, racial hierarchies were all-pervasive. But with carnival, time changed. Domination, like everything else, was a performance. And, therefore, contingent: as changeable as the seasons; as temporary as a mask, fluid as a dance calypso.