

Cugoano250 Che Lovelace at St James's Piccadilly

When the formerly enslaved abolitionist Quobna Ottobah Cugoano published his stirring jeremiad against the trans-Atlantic slave trade, *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* (1787), he suggested his detractors might reduce his words to 'the rattling leaves of autumn, that may soon be blown away...'. That others went on to successfully argue as fiercely as he did for the trade's abolition, and that his book remains in print to this day, is evidence that his detractors were wrong. But whilst his words live on, little is known today about Cugoano. Outside of the sparse facts he offers about himself in *Thoughts and Sentiments*, the only event in his life that is recorded with certainty is the date of his baptism – 20 August 1773 – which took place at St James's Church, Piccadilly, and which Cugoano hoped would prevent him from ever being re-enslaved.

It is for this reason that St James's chose to commemorate the 250th anniversary of that baptism this year by commissioning four vibrant paintings that were permanently installed in the church's narthex and unveiled on 20 September. A team consisting of the curator Ekow Eshun, St James's Creative Director Richard Parry, clergy and laity contacted Trinidadian artist Che Lovelace, whose artistic approach they felt best embodied Cugoano's prophetic vision for a new world. Their aim was not to commission these paintings for the sake of St James's reputation but to 'get out of the way'¹ and amplify his already powerful voice.

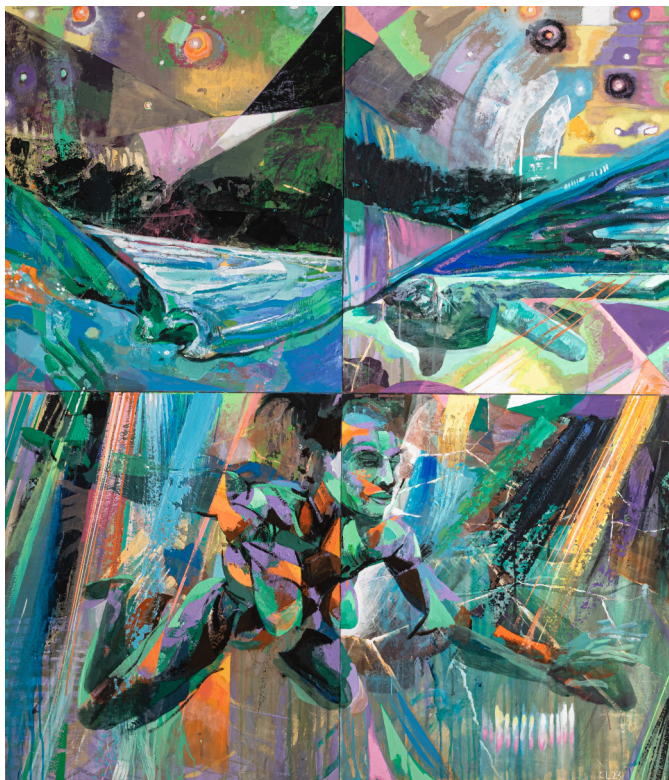
There is an obvious challenge in trying to 'get out of the way' of someone about whom we know so little and still do justice to their vision. Yet Lovelace noted in conversation with the Reverend

Lucy Winkett, Rector of St James's, that as a Caribbean man still affected by the history and trauma of slavery, it didn't take much for him to connect with someone like Cugoano. Indeed, black artists have long responded to the fact that black lives throughout history have gone unrecorded by developing new methods for engaging with the archive. Consider Wilda Gafney's use of her sanctified womanist imagination in *Womanist Midrash* (Westminster John Knox, 2017), or Saidiya Hartman's tracing of black lives at the turn of the 20th Century in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (Serpent's Tail, 2019); where blackness hovers wordlessly in the interstices of historical record, affective and instinctive tools must be used alongside positivist methods.

These tools are put to good use in Lovelace's paintings, which do not attempt to present literal, historical facts about Cugoano or his life. Instead, they are partially abstracted, channelling the spirit of this baptismal anniversary. In *Passage*, where a woman floats serenely submerged in the ocean, we find a connection between the horror of the Middle Passage and the freedom of baptism. And there's *The River*, in which two men stand side by side washing their bodies. The quotidian meditateness of this image evokes what Kevin Quashie has called the 'sovereignty of quiet', of that interior space that exists outside political resistance in which black people have hoped to be able to rest for more than moments at a time.

Lovelace's fragmentary, splintering use of shape and brilliant colour is evocative of another black method of communicating with the archive: the practice of black artists across musical genres sampling their predecessors, a means of carrying their voices across time with integrity while bringing them into contemporary contexts. The composite, collage-like effect of Lovelace's painting style, along with the fact that each commissioned piece is formed of four separate panels, does something similar to Cugoano's voice, joining it with the myriad radical voices that came after it.

The need to consider Cugoano's present-day relevance is at the



forefront of the minds of St James's congregation, who gathered following the unveiling to ask what comes next. They stated that anti-racist work today is essential, that we must be inspired by Cugoano's bravery, and that the discussion this commission has sparked is ongoing and only at its beginning. It is a conversation that extends well past parish bounds: people as far as Ghana and Trinidad have celebrated this commission alongside the congregation. And it makes sense for this conversation to begin in church. Cugoano's book subverted the white supremacist theology of his day to make a Christian argument for abolition. Any Christian who is met in St James's by Lovelace's paintings therefore faces the question of how we can subversively use the same Christian faith that colludes in so much suffering today to eradicate the causes of that suffering.

This is an urgent question. With his message newly amplified, we are free to hear Cugoano's promise, made in the fiery tradition of the jeremiad, that if his voice and those that join it are ignored, they 'may yet arise with a louder voice, as the rolling thunder ... not only to shake the leaves of the most stout in heart, but to rend the mountains before them.'

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1. Lucy Winkett from: <https://www.churchtimes.co.uk/articles/2023/25-august/news/uk/piccadilly-plaque-recalls-18th-century-abolitionist>



Left: Che Lovelace, *Passage and The River*, 2023

Above: Che Lovelace, *Spirit*, 2023

Photos by Brendan Delzin.



MADE IN GOD'S IMAGE

We are inviting contact from **artists** who are interested in submitting a piece for the exhibition.

The artwork should consider key stories or people in the Bible from the artist's own faith, culture, and perspective.

For more information, please see the **Artists'** page at www.gods-image.co.uk/artists

Go to bit.ly/MIGIArt2024SignUp to receive emails for more information as we launch the exhibition.

