

Maud Sulter: *Passion*

1 April to 4 June 2016



Exhibition Guide

Passion is a Street Level Photoworks/ Autograph ABP partnership in association with TrAIN

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impressionsgallery



Sphinx (1987)

'In the photographic essay Sphinx I explored the shipping posts of slavery days. Tiny islands off the coast of West Africa where in a handful of sand one can still uncover beads torn from our bodies before an internment which culminated in transportation by ship.'

Sulter made these photographs at St James Island, off the coast of Gambia. Named after King James II of England (1685–1688), the island was part of the former British Empire and was one of many slave shipping-ports on the west coast of Africa. Its military fort and prison are now in ruins. In 2011, the island abandoned its colonial name and was renamed Kunta Kinteh Island, after a Gambian man brought by slave-ship to Maryland, US, in 1767.

When the full set of nine photographs of *Sphinx* was first exhibited, it was accompanied by Sulter's words, *'Only the wailing of the women remained'*.

Black and white photographic prints

Loaned by Harris Museum & Art Gallery, Preston

Image credit: from the series Sphinx (1987)

© Maud Sulter, courtesy The Harris Museum & Art Gallery, Preston



Noir et Blanc: Quatre



Duval



Dumas



Malheureusement: Malheureusement, pendant que nous discussions...

Syrcas (1993)

'The 'Circus' series, like many of my other bodies of work, has a text which is a poem, which is a fictional account of a character we call Monique who finds herself in the middle of Europe during the Second World War and is a woman of African and European descent.'

Sulter's poem 'Blood Money' tells the story of Monique, who is born in Cameroon, migrates to Europe and becomes a circus performer in the 1930s and 1940s. She has a daughter, Helga, but as ethnic minorities they are persecuted in Nazi Germany. Monique is killed in the Holocaust. Helga survives to make a scrapbook, the pages of which, it is suggested, form *Syrcas*. A copy of the poem 'Blood Money' is on the Reading Table.

Sulter made small photo-collages using vintage Alpine postcards, and images from books on African art and European painting. She then photographed her collages, enlarging them to the size seen here. You can view an original collage in one of the display cases, and see the whole series at original scale in the plan chest.

Syrcas is Welsh for 'circus'. Sulter was interested in how colonial invaders used language to impose domination on a country, such as English on the Welsh people. The titles for each image in *Syrcas* were taken from a set of Linguaphone records for learning French. French language was imposed upon many countries in North, West and Central Africa in the 19th century, as part of the spread of the French empire.

Photocollages, rephotographed and enlarged, loaned by The Estate of Maud Sulter

Image credits: from the series Syrcas (1993)

© Maud Sulter, courtesy The Estate of Maud Sulter



Voyager: Je me rapelle que tu brossais ta perruque un peu avant le coup de téléphone de M. Faciste



Hélas l'héroïne: Madame Laura est chez elle



Malheureusement: Malheureusement, comme d'habitude je comparais la couleur de mon rouge à lèvres et celle de mon foulard...



Noir et Blanc: Trois



Hélas l'héroïne: Quelques instants plus tard, Monique cherchait sa brosse à cheveux



Voyager: J'étais en train de choisir une cravate pour sortir avec ma femme



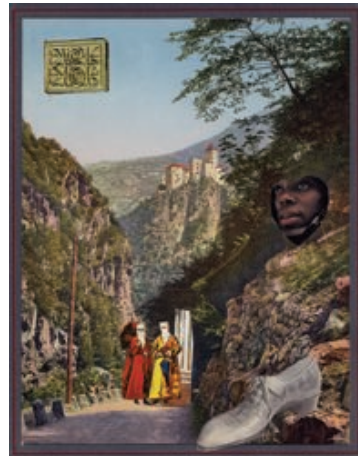
Malheureusement: Malheureusement, parce que tu parlais d'anges



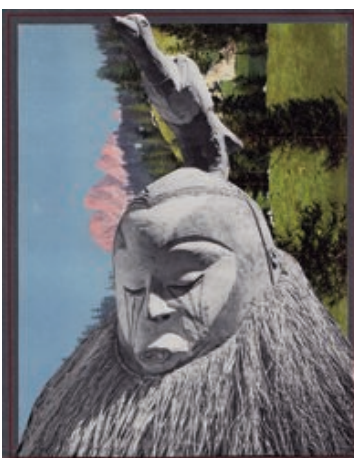
Noir et Blanc: Deux



Hélas l'héroïne: Vous parliez de moi?



Voyager: Je lui parlais du film que nous allons voir lorsque le téléphone sonne



Noir et Blanc: Cinq



Noir et Blanc: Un



Significant Others (1993)

'My Scottish grandfather was an amateur photographer, and he had some of his work published, and he was very interested in using cameras. So the Box Brownie camera at the bottom of the wardrobe was the first influence on the notion that you could take pictures, and questions around what and who you might take pictures of.'

One of my most favourite images that I have is of me in a pram as a very small child being photographed by a street photographer, together with a parrot on the pram.'

Maud Sulter used her family photos in various ways in her work. These two images come from a series of nine called *Significant Others*, which explored Sulter's Scottish ancestry and the connections between family and identity. The two images were exhibited in New York in 1994, accompanied by her poems 'Circa 1930' and 'Seashells and Sandcastles for a Princess'. Copies of the poems can be found on the Reading Table.

*Black and white photographs, enlarged and re-printed
Loaned by The Estate of Maud Sulter*



Poetry in Motion (1985)

'Poetry in Motion uses mixed-media to present a socio-documentary comment on our situation in the 20th century. The threat from the Superpowers, racist attacks and the co-option of our myriad struggles as African/ women by the right and so-called left.'

These early collages feature three of Sulter's poems from her first collection of poetry, *As a Blackwoman*. Each poem came from the book's section 'Under Attack', which was concerned with violence and racism. Sulter combined her poems with photographs and newspaper cuttings that she had burned.

The collages were included in the groundbreaking exhibition 'The Thin Black Line' at the Institute for the Contemporary Arts in London in 1985. The exhibition, curated by Lubaina Himid, gave prominence to a generation of radical young black women artists.

Photocollages on paper, photographed copies from the originals

Loaned by The Estate of Maud Sulter

Image credit: Nightmare, from the series Poetry in Motion (1985) © Maud Sulter, courtesy the Estate of Maud Sulter



Hysteria (1991)

'Hysteria tells the story of a 19th century Blackwoman artist who sails from the Americas to Europe to seek fame and fortune as a sculptor. Having achieved a successful career, she disappears.'

Hysteria was partly inspired by Edmonia Lewis (c.1844–1907), the celebrated 19th century sculptor of African American and Native American heritage.

The characters in the photographs include Hysteria, Hagg and Crone, who enact scenes staged as if in a 19th century photographer's studio, featuring painted backdrops, costumes and accessories.

The title *Hysteria* also makes reference to the 19th century work of Jean-Marie Charcot at the Salpêtrière Psychiatric Hospital in Paris. Photographs of 'hysterical' women were published by Charcot and used to diagnose an apparently feminine disorder, which has since been discredited by medical authorities.

Black and white photographic prints with marble plaques

Loaned by The Estate of Maud Sulter

*Image credit: Hysteria, from the series Hysteria (1991)
© Maud Sulter, courtesy the Estate of Maud Sulter*



Les Bijoux (2002)

In *Les Bijoux* (The Jewels), Maud Sulter plays a character inspired by the 19th century Frenchwoman Jeanne Duval (c.1820–1862).

Duval was an actress and dancer of Creole (mixed European and black African) ancestry, and was the romantic partner of French poet Charles Baudelaire. She was the muse for some of his most celebrated poems, including 'Le Serpent qui danse' (The Dancing Serpent), 'Parfum Exotique' (Exotic Perfume)', and 'Les Bijoux', published in 1857.

The opening lines of 'Les Bijoux' read:

*My darling was naked, and knowing my heart well,
She was wearing only her sonorous jewels,
Whose opulent display made her look triumphant
Like Moorish concubines on their fortunate days.*

Feminist critics including the novelist Angela Carter have argued that Baudelaire perceived Duval as exotic, sexualised and corrupting, in line with stereotypical beliefs of Creole women of that era. Sulter, however, resisted this view. She emphasised 'the vast contradictions in how Duval is seen and portrayed', and sought to explore the passions and emotions that ran through Duval's relationship with Baudelaire.

Large-format colour Polaroid photographs

Loaned by The Estate of Maud Sulter

Image credit: From the series Les Bijoux (2002)

© Maud Sulter, courtesy The Estate of Maud Sulter



Terpsichore



Calliope



Clio

Zabat (1989)

Zabat is a word invented by Maud Sulter:

'Zabat n. 1. Sacred dance performed by groups of thirteen. 2. 'An occasion of power' – possible origin of witches sabbat. 3. Blackwomen's rite of passage [Egyptian 18th dynasty].'

Zabat depicts contemporary black women in the guise of the Nine Muses of the ancient Greek myth. The Muses were goddesses of the arts and sciences, traditionally represented in the history of Western art as white women. The term 'muse' has since come to mean a woman, or a force personified as a woman, who is a source of inspiration for an artist.

The selection on view here shows *Clio*, the Muse of history; *Terpsichore*, the Muse of dance and lyric poetry; and *Calliope*, the Muse of epic poetry. Maud Sulter herself plays *Calliope*, holding a daguerreotype (an early form of photograph). Sulter claimed that the daguerreotype represents Jeanne Duval, the 'Black Venus' and muse of 19th century French poet Charles Baudelaire.

Sulter wrote a series of nine poems entitled *Zabat Narratives*, one for each of the Muses. Copies of the poems are presented on the Reading Table.

Cibachrome photographic prints

Calliope and *Terpsichore* loaned by Edinburgh City Arts Centre. *Clio* loaned by The McManus: Dundee's Art Gallery & Museum. Image credits: *Calliope* and *Terpsichore* (1989) © Maud Sulter, courtesy Edinburgh City Art Centre. *Clio* (1989) © Maud Sulter, courtesy The McManus: Dundee's Art Gallery & Museum



Twa Blak Wimmin (1997)

'I have been thinking about these women for a long time since I discovered them... Really they've continued to haunt me. There is a compulsion to imagine that black people arrived in Britain in the 1950s and they hadn't been here before. So to recognise a more historical link between Europe and Africa is important to me.'

The spelling of the title (Two Black Women) suggests old Scots language, and was inspired by historical accounts of 'Blak Margaret' and 'Blak Elene' at the court of King James IV of Scotland (1473–1513).

William Dunbar, poet to the royal court, wrote of a splendidly attired black woman who took part in a tournament lasting forty days, after which she disappeared. The presence of black women at the Scottish court is also documented in records of gifts of gowns, fabric and money given to 'Blak Elene' or 'Elen More' in 1512 and 'Blak Margaret' in 1513.

A recording of Maud Sulter reading aloud her poem series *Alba*, which is also inspired by Margaret and Elene, can be listened to on the Reading Table.

R-type print with copper panel

Loaned by the MAG Collection

Image credit: Twa Blak Wimmin (1997) © Maud Sulter, courtesy the MAG Collection



Jeanne: A Melodrama I-IV (1994)

'My ongoing visual fascination with Jeanne Duval began in 1988 with a visceral response to a Nadar photograph captioned Unknown Woman. There she stared at me willing me to give her a name, an identity, a voice. So for over a decade I have been image making with her in mind, from Calliope in Zabat, 1989 to Les Bijoux, 2002.'

Jeanne: A Melodrama I-IV is a set of photocollages that features a portrait by the French 19th century photographer Nadar, which may or may not represent Jeanne Duval. Some sources state that Duval died in 1862. Nadar claimed to be the last person to see Duval, in 1870, when she was suffering from an illness.

Jeanne Duval also features elsewhere in this exhibition, in the artworks *Syracas*, *Zabat*, and *Les Bijoux*.

Photocollages

Loaned by The Estate of Maud Sulter

Image credit: Jeanne: A Melodrama I-IV (1994)

© Maud Sulter, courtesy The Estate of Maud Sulter

Further information

Publications

Maud Sulter: Passion

Texts by Deborah Cherry, Malcolm Dickson and Mark Haworth-Booth
Published by Altitude Editions

Available from our shop at the special price of £15 during the exhibition only, a saving of £10 on the usual price of £25.

Maud Sulter: Syrcas

Limited edition large-format zine
Texts by Deborah Cherry and Mark Sealy
Published by Autograph

Available at our shop, price £3

Events

Altered Images: Photocollage Workshop

Saturday 23 April, 12.00pm to 3.00pm. Free, drop in.

Explore a range of collage techniques with Bradford-based artist Jean McEwan, and find out how altering existing images can dramatically change their meaning. Suitable for all ages.

Time for Tea

Friday 6 May, 11.30am to 1.30pm. Free, drop in.

Enjoy tea, cake and a tour of the exhibition at our regular free event for the over 55s.

In Conversation: Marlene Smith and Malcolm Dickson

Saturday 21 May, 2pm to 3.30pm. Free, booking advised.

Part of Bradford Literature Festival

Malcolm Dickson, co-curator of *Passion*, will discuss Maud Sulter's work with artist Marlene Smith, a key figure in the British black arts movement. Followed by refreshments.
Book via impressions-gallery.com/events or call 01274 737843.

Saturday Stop

Every Saturday 10.30am to 4.30pm. Free, drop in.

Fun for families; get creative on our drawing wall and enjoy our make-and-take activities.

