

A LONG ROAD HOME

Rianna Jade Parker *talks to* Winston Branch *about a life dedicated to art, late recognition, and the many journeys of his painting Zachary II*

Winston and I met for breakfast at the Chelsea Arts Club in London and kept company for much longer than either of us anticipated. So many things about his life narratives both shocked and delighted me. *Zachary II* 1982, a painting that embodies a move in his practice from figuration towards an 'abstraction inspired by nature', was considered but not acquired by Tate almost 40 years ago, and it, like Branch, subsequently embarked on a decades-long journey across the globe. Today it is part of the national collection and is on display at Tate Britain.

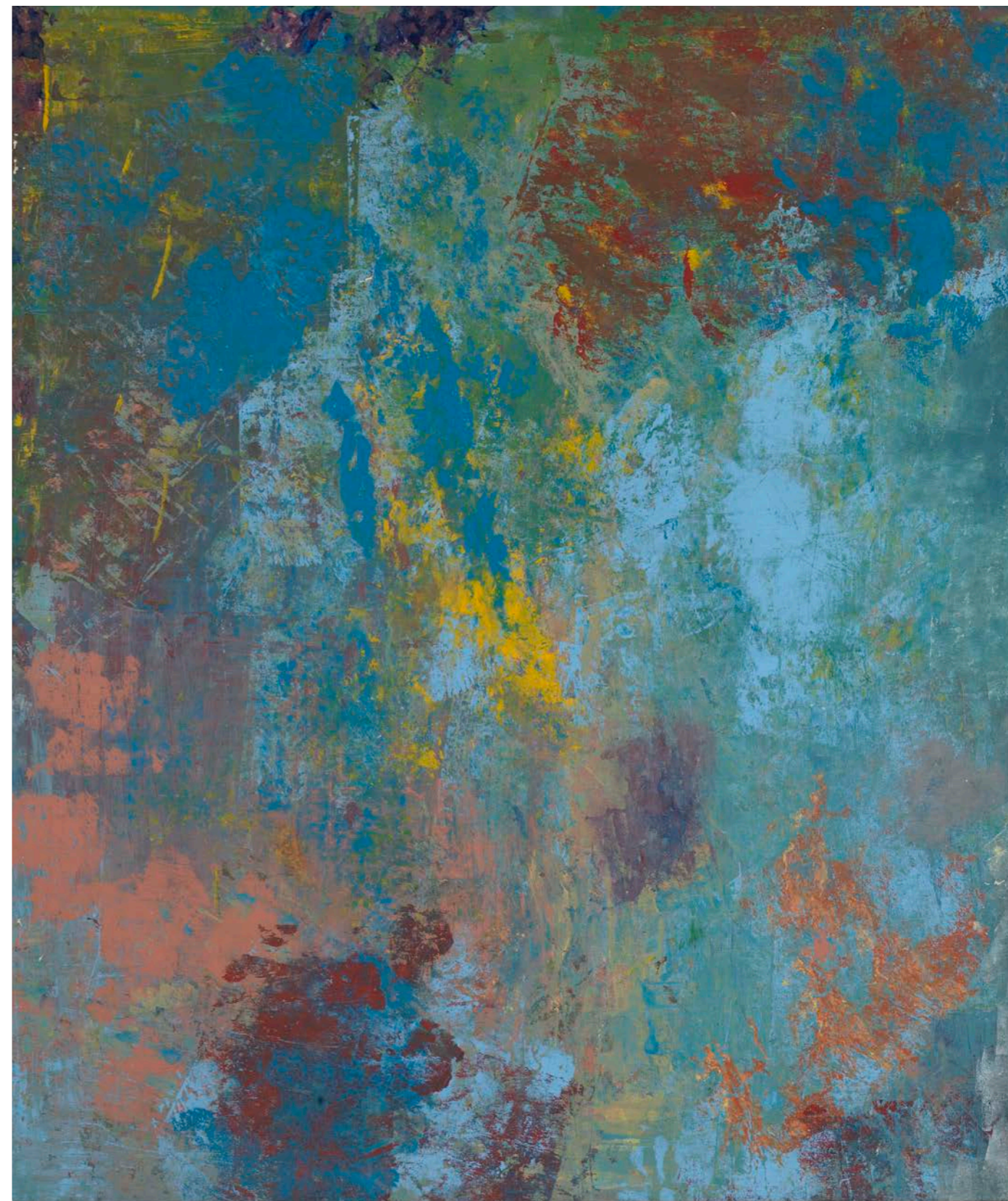
I first found Branch's name when researching the London-based Caribbean Artist Movement (CAM) and learned that he represented Britain at FESTAC 77 (The Second World Festival of Black and African Arts and Culture) in Lagos, Nigeria. I was instinctively proud without knowing him. Following a degree at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, he was awarded the British Prix de Rome in 1971 and attended the British School at Rome at the age of 24. He has served as an Artist in Residence at Fisk University, the prestigious historically Black university in Tennessee, participated in the Artists-in-Berlin Programme, received a Guggenheim Fellowship, and has garnered an array of accolades in the United States, the Caribbean and around the world, culminating in an honorary doctorate from the University of Greenwich. As a British-born Jamaican, I rely heavily on intergenerational exchanges with artists like Winston Branch and his contemporaries for the meaning and value that can be extracted when we convene together.



Winston Branch in his studio in London, 1982

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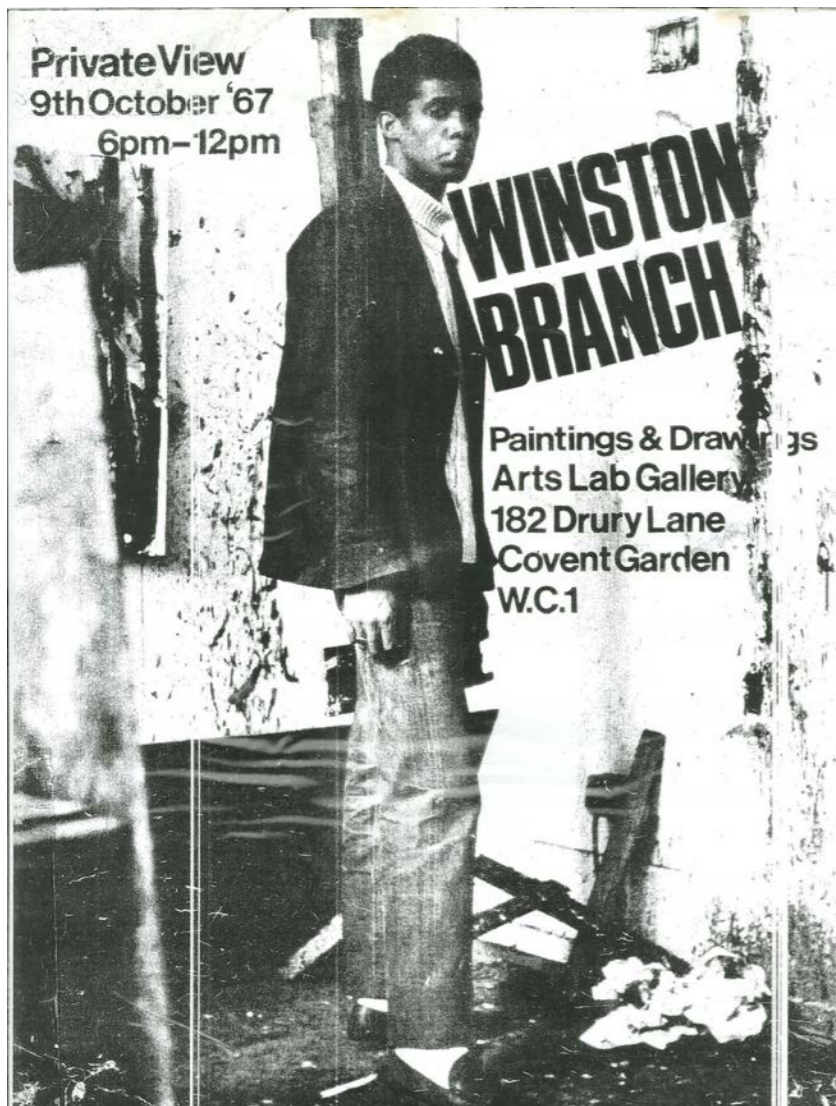
Winston Branch
Zachary II 1982
Polyvinyl acetate and
acrylic paint on canvas
204.3 × 173.1 cm

Zachary II was made in London in 1982. Branch has spoken about his early interest in French painter Claude Monet's (1840–1926) *Water Lilies* and, later, the

influence of fellow French painter Henri Matisse (1869–1954) and Russian painter Nicolas de Staël (1914–1955). This interest led to Branch's use of 'pure abstraction' in

his work. The ultimate excitement, he said, was 'to explore the magic of paint: the way a total amorphous substance is transformed into an illusory subject'.

Art historian Eddie Chambers has commented that Branch 'confounded and frustrated stereotypes of what work a "Black artist" should be producing'.



RIANNA JADE PARKER *What was your route here, Winston?*

WINSTON BRANCH I was born in St Lucia and left for England when I was 12. I had an aptitude for art and so I was sent off to study and become an 'Englishman', as my father said.

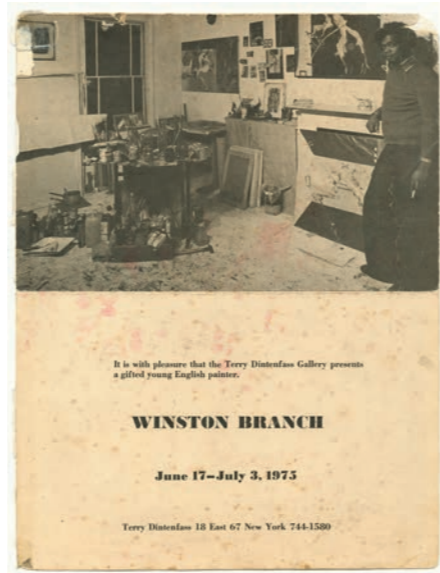
RJP *You enrolled at the Slade, UCL, not long after you arrived. What was studying there like for you?*

WB The Slade was the turning point in my life. It gave me social opportunities; it gave me moments to show my work. My first exhibition in London, a one-man show at the Arts Lab, was in 1967 when I was still a student. By the time I graduated, I'd had exhibitions in Algeria, in the United States and in France.

RJP *You have a poster from that time on your Facebook page. Is that your studio?*

WB Yes. That's me in my room in the Slade when I was painting for my show. I had a little studio where I could paint and do my work and read. The thing about painting is that you have to be disciplined. You have to do your research. I spent a lot of time studying art, going to the Wallace Collection, the Courtauld Institute and the British Museum, looking at paintings of all genres. Anything that interested me. It's like writers, they don't only read one book. They read every novel they can in order to find their voice.

RJP *You quickly moved away from portraiture and began working more with abstraction and expressionism; but you have said that your paintings give dignity to Black*



people. How have you achieved that in a way that is different from other Black artists in Britain?

WB Black people are not stereotypes. That is what the structure of racism puts upon you. It puts you in a box, and therefore you can't see what is possible. And because you can't see what is possible, you begin to accept what is given to you. It kills your imagination.

I am a man who lives in the world, who chose to become a painter. I didn't become a painter to protest. Black art is not about Black images. Delacroix, Rembrandt, Turner – they have all painted Black images. I depict narratives of Black people. For example, after I read *The Black Jacobins* by C.L.R. James, I made a 30-foot-long painting about Toussaint Louverture and the Haitian Revolution. I painted it as an historical, iconographical work – the same way Géricault painted *The Raft of the Medusa*, and Velasquez *Las Meninas*, and Picasso painted *Guernica*. A painter seizes on ideas and paints them. And ideas are disseminated, first and foremost, to illuminate the imagination. To light it up. I'm not angry; I'm expressing dissent. The right to a different opinion.

RJP *One of your most famous works, Zachary II, is now hanging in Tate Britain. When and where was it made?*

WB *Zachary II* is one of a series of paintings I made between 1982 and 1984 in London, in a warehouse that I was renting off

Opposite: Flyer for Winston Branch's first exhibition in London, at Arts Lab Gallery, 1967

Flyer for an exhibition of Winston Branch's paintings at Terry Dintenfass Gallery, New York, 1975

Right: Winston Branch with a selection of his paintings at the home of Lady Mirabel Kelly, c.1980



All © Winston Branch

Tottenham Court Road. There were about eight works in this particular series, all painted in acrylic. The series deals with the language of painting. I was interested in light, and colour; the humanity of colours. I was also interested in space. With *Zachary II*, I was following Tintoretto and Titian, juxtaposing one colour upon another to create an illusion of movement and depth. That's what you see in *Zachary II*.

RJP *Was this the beginning of your relationship with Tate?*

WB Representatives from the gallery visited my studio and selected *Zachary II*, along with three other paintings in the series for purchase in 1985, but then sent them back due to a lack of 'gallery space'. And so I went on to other pastures. I went to St Lucia, I went to New York, I went to Berlin. I just kept painting. But it was a bitter pill to swallow.

RJP *When did you move to the Caribbean, and why? Were things radically different in St Lucia, compared to London?*

WB I moved back in 1992. I wanted to get in touch with the Caribbean and Latin America, and to get my creative juices flowing. I painted and exhibited, and

revamped my career completely. I re-energised. I also felt appreciated, whereas in London I felt like I was being suffocated. I wasn't getting the acknowledgement I wanted. There was no daylight. My absence was out of choice, but also out of circumstance. And I have no qualms about that.

RJP *Why not?*

WB Well, first of all, no-one asks you to paint. If you take on a difficult career, you have to bear the consequences. Hard work, sweat and perseverance get you to where you want to get to. And I had to find my way.

RJP *When did you make the decision to return to England, and what had happened to Zachary II in the intervening years?*

WB I returned to England from California, because I missed my fish and chips, and the painting followed soon after. It had travelled immensely. From London it went to Jersey, to Santa Domingo, to Ecuador, to Belize. And in 1997, it was shown in New York, in an exhibition of British art called *Transforming the Crown*, curated by Mora Beauchamp-Byrd. And then it came with me to California, where I was a

professor at UC Berkeley, and it stayed until I returned to England.

I began to speak to the Director of Tate, Nick Serota, after I got back, and suggested that they take the original series. They acquired *Zachary II*. It's interesting to consider how this painting travelled the world like me, and eventually came back to London like me. A long road, as it turned out, but a happy one.

RJP *Do you feel that you're still enjoying the road? Has it been worth the journey?*

WB Well, I'll always be on that road. I don't worry about the past, and there's a lot I still want to do. As long as I have breath, and desire, I want to go on. It took a long time for my work to be put on display at Tate. If I had thrown in the towel back then, where would I be now? There are many ways up the mountain and nobody can stop you climbing it. And that's all there is.

Zachary II was presented by Tate Members in 2018 and is included in the display *Sixty Years: The Unfinished Conversation* at Tate Britain.

Winston Branch is an artist who lives and works in London.

Rianna Jade Parker is a critic, curator and researcher based in South London. Her book *A Brief History of Black British Art* is published by Tate Publishing.