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The superhero who got under my skin



Growing up in 1970s London, *Ekow Eshun* saw himself in the adventures of Marvel's first black superhero. As 'Black Panther' arrives in cinemas, he celebrates a cultural turning point

King T'Challa of the African nation of Wakanda stands in the loading bay of a plane as it hurtles through the sky. Beside him a member of his retinue offers some advice: "Don't freeze." T'Challa raises an eyebrow, all regal self-possession: "I never freeze."

He pulls on the full-face mask of the superhero known as the Black Panther. A hatch opens beneath him and he drops out of the aircraft, feet first with no parachute, plunging through the clouds and into combat below.

A minute into a trailer for *Black Panther*, the new Marvel Studios movie based on the first black comic-book superhero, and we already know this about the character: he is proud; he is fearless; and he is effortlessly cool.

The *Black Panther* film opens later this month and so far audiences can't get enough of it. When the first trailer launched last year it racked up 89m views in 24 hours.

Marvel, the comics company turned Disney-backed entertainment powerhouse, has made more than \$13bn in the past decade with movies starring superheroes such as Captain America, *The Avengers* and the *Guardians of the Galaxy*. But with *Black Panther*, the studio seems to be taking the lead from its rival, Warner Bros.

Warner scored one of its biggest superhero hits last year with *Wonder Woman*. At its centre was a powerful female lead, shattering the notion that comic-book films should only be made in the image of a young male audience.

Black Panther is following a similar track – only it's out to challenge assumptions of race, not gender. Director Ryan Coogler, star Chadwick Boseman and most of the supporting cast, including Lupita Nyong'o, Angela Bassett and Forest Whitaker, are black. Much of the film is set in Africa. And King T'Challa's elite unit of female bodyguards sport shaven heads and heavy jewellery that wouldn't look out of place at Afropunk, the New York-based alternative black music festival, whose slogan could easily also apply to the movie:

"Unapologetically Black". Only when it opens will it be clear if *Black Panther* is the kind of epochal event some fans anticipate: as one blogger has put it, "The Most Important Movie Black People will See . . . EVER".

Screen fortunes aside, the Panther has been a compelling if sometimes problematic character for more than 50 years. His evolution through the decades has reflected shifting attitudes to race and also highlighted how comic books can both critique society and be a source of resonant myths for a modern age. With America's racial politics more fraught than in a long time, the appearance of an African superhero in a Hollywood blockbuster feels like a cultural turning point – and not just for a son of Ghanaian parents who grew up devoted to Marvel comics in a 1970s Britain rife with racism.

The *Black Panther* first appeared in July 1966's issue 52 of *Fantastic Four*, Marvel Comics' flagship title of the period. He was, from the beginning, an enigmatic figure.

The comic book's titular heroes are invited by T'Challa to Wakanda, a mysterious, isolated kingdom. The country proves to be an African Shangri-La, where science and spirituality comfortably coexist. T'Challa gains his powers of superhuman strength, agility and enhanced senses through his connection with the country's powerful panther god. And Wakanda is revealed as the most technologically sophisticated nation on earth, with know-how and weaponry that far outstrips western capability. The apparent paradox of an ultra-advanced country in what the *Fantastic Four* call "the heart of the jungle" baffles the group. When T'Challa arranges a ride for them in a noiseless Wakandan aircraft powered by magnetic waves, their confusion is all too clear: "How does some refugee from a Tarzan movie lay his hands on this kinda gizmo?"

It's quickly clear T'Challa is far from the kind of spear-throwing savage imagined by Edgar Rice Burroughs. The first black superhero in comic books has the



Clockwise from main: Marvel's *Black Panther*, drawn by Gabrielle Dell'Otto; a still from the film starring Lupita Nyong'o, left, and Letitia Wright; Chadwick Boseman plays T'Challa/Black Panther; a *Fantastic Four* comic book



looks of Sidney Poitier, the erudition of a man schooled at "the best universities of both hemispheres", and a sensualist's eye for interior decor. Invited into his groovy Wakandan bachelor apartment, the *Fantastic Four* can only gape: "Wow! Wotta pad! I'll bet even Hugh Hefner couldn't improve on this layout!"

Marvel superheroes of the 1960s tended to have a signal vulnerability. Iron Man's impenetrable armour shielded a guy with a weak heart. The

Comic books helped shape who I am today. Through them I came to understand that being black could be its own kind of superpower

Hulk was a rational scientist liable to transform into a raging id monster. The *Fantastic Four* were an extended family whose bonds were weakened by constant bickering.

The *Black Panther* was different. What should have been his biggest weakness – his origin in a supposedly backward continent – was in fact his greatest strength.

I first discovered the Panther in the 1970s. It was a hard time to be young and African. I was born in London but for a few years as an infant my parents took me to Ghana, their home. We returned to London in 1974, where I discovered that my memories of Africa – heat, verdure, giant snails the size of an adult fist, the abrupt vanishing of the equatorial sun every night at 6pm – bore little relation to how the continent was seen in Britain.

From *Tintin in the Congo* to Michael Caine in *Zulu*, Africa was a place of mudhut-dwelling natives, primitive and savage and ignorant of the outside world.

At primary school my friends mimed the throwing of spears in my company. They plucked at my supposedly woolly hair. After *Roots* ran on TV I was met in the playground with calls of "Kunta

Kinte". Looking back, I'm not upset at my friends' behaviour.

They were only mimicking a disdain for Africa that runs deep through western thinking.

Writing in the 19th century, the German philosopher FW Hegel dismissed the continent as "enveloped in the dark mantle of Night", its people only representative of "natural man in his completely wild and untamed state".

His views were echoed in the 1960s by the historian Hugh Trevor-Roper, who could find no evidence of civilisation there. "Perhaps in the future there will be some African history to teach," he argued. "But at the present there is none; there is only the history of Europeans in Africa. The rest is darkness".

In an influential essay from 1994, the American foreign-affairs writer Robert D Kaplan described a trip across a continent riddled with disease, corruption and violence. In Conakry, the capital of Guinea, he found a "nightmarish Dickensian spectacle" of poverty and degradation. The streets, Kaplan wrote, "were one long puddle of floating garbage."

Mosquitoes and flies were everywhere. Children, many of whom had protruding bellies, seemed as numerous as ants. When the tide went out, dead rats and the skeletons of cars were exposed on the mucky beach."

Contempt for Africa also sat within a climate of racial bigotry that permeated the 1970s. The hostility of the period felt very real and very personal. There were National Front logos carved into the desks at school and I went in fear of being accosted by the skinheads who used to hang around near the gates dressed in Fred Perry shirts and 16-hole Dr Martens boots.

On TV I watched West Brom's black footballers Laurie Cunningham, Cyrille Regis and Brendon Batson face jeers and monkey chants from their own fans. And when Margaret Thatcher talked about Britons feeling "swamped by people with a different culture", her words stung like a slap across the face.

It was superheroes that rescued me. My bedroom floor was piled deep with copies of the *The Avengers*, *The Mighty Thor* and *The Uncanny X-Men*, and in those stories I found a way to escape reality and also make better sense of it.

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Busy Brussels, sunny London

The Art Market | Belgium ups the pace; fresh rumours of LA move for Frieze; wool artist in New York; Derain for London sales. By *Melanie Gerlis*

There's a fine line between a mixed-discipline art fair and a jumble sale — but Brafa, the Brussels event for 134 galleries, falls on the right side of the equation (until Sunday, Tour & Taxis exhibition hall). Its range is huge — an Arizona meteorite (ArtAncient, €70,000); a flash-activated screen-print by Hank Willis Thomas ("Race Riot (Solarized)", 2017, Maruani Mercier, €35,000); an Instagram-friendly Soviet spacesuit (Theatrum Mundi, €130,000); and a strong outing of tribal art from 10 specialists. Quality varies, but newcomers, including Osborne Samuel and Gladstone galleries, point to a continuing improvement.

With its flower displays, niche categories and core of family-owned businesses, the smaller Brafa feels like a warm-up to Tefaf Maastricht in March — this year, 23 exhibitors show at both. While most of these find the proximity of the fairs logistically problematic, Brafa, the oldest fair on the circuit and established in 1956, wants to keep its place as the first European commercial event of the year, which encourages a full and spendthrift crowd.

Early sales included the spacesuit, and paintings by Hans Hartung, Jean Metzinger and Jean-Paul Riopelle from Geneva's Bailly Gallery (up to €250,000). Among the tribal fare, Brussels expert Didier Claes sold nine Yaka masks (Democratic Republic of Congo, late 19th to early 20th century, between €10,000 and €30,000 each).

Brussels is very much on the mind of Elizabeth Dee, co-founder of New York's alternative Independent art fair, which opened in the Belgian capital in

2016. Living up to the fair's name, Dee has decided to move its third edition away from being a satellite of the Art Brussels contemporary art fair in April and instead let it stand on its own two feet in November.

"Belgium used to be a place that the art crowd visited only once a year, but the pace has changed and its audience is more layered now. We can be more than an addendum," Dee says.

Her decision was accelerated by the recent appointment of Vincent Honoré, senior curator at London's Hayward Gallery, as guest curator of Independent Brussels. They promise a more innovative and experiential fair including dance, poetry and "activations". Honoré says: "Of course it will still be a fair, but I think of it as a short festival, where the market, the museums, the non-profits can co-exist."

Dee will not be drawn on whether the change in dates means that her fair



Main picture: 'Londres: La Tamise au pont de Westminster' (1906-07) by André Derain, estimated to sell for £6m-£9m at Christie's

Left: Yaka mask at Didier Claes, where examples sold for between €10,000 and €30,000



can encourage more of the Art Brussels galleries to show at both — the overlap is currently minimal — though this seems a likely outcome.

Independent remains in Brussels's Vandeborghht building, a quirky former shopping mall (November 8-11).

Whispers that Frieze is looking seriously at Los Angeles, its third city after London and New York, have been circulating for years, even before the art-fair franchise teamed up with Hollywood talent agency WME-IMG (now Endeavor) in 2016. As this column went to press, those rumours were getting stronger after dealers

convened at last week's Art Los Angeles Contemporary fair and as In Other Words, the weekly newsletter and podcast produced by advisory firm Art Agency Partners, reported that the fair was looking to launch its first LA edition in January 2019.

Frieze wouldn't comment on any plans and reiterated its commitment to the New York fair (May 3-6).

Overlooked female artists continue to get their late moment in the sun. In her 70th year, Chile-born multidisciplinary artist Cecilia Vicuña has been taken on by Lehmann Maupin gallery, which plans its first show of the

artist in New York from May 19. A joint project is also planned for the Brooklyn Museum and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston this spring and autumn.

Now based in New York, Vicuña came back to art-world attention in last summer's edition of the five-yearly contemporary art show Documenta, particularly for her so-called "quipu" works. These use unspun wool to emulate the pre-Columbian system of communication using knots.

Anna Stohart, director at Lehmann Maupin, says Vicuña's use of materials, as well as a practice featuring poetry and performance, made the artist "an outlier from her contemporaries".

Under-appreciated artists are also getting their due from Ales Ortuzar, a New York art adviser and previously a partner at David Zwirner gallery, who is opening a two-year project space dedicated to the overlooked on February 16. "A lot of my clients were seduced by the top end of the contemporary art market but taste has been maturing and they are now looking for more context," he says.

Ortuzar opens his first show in White Street, Tribeca, dedicated to French artist Michel Parmentier (1938-2000). Parmentier took a break from making art between 1968 and 1983, and painted just over 70 works in his lifetime.

Ortuzar's show will have four of these — one from 1966, when Parmentier worked in blue (he varied colours every year), and others from 1967 (grey), 1968 (red) and 1983 (black), priced at \$400,000 each. Four large-scale works on paper also feature (\$150,000 each).

London's notoriously miserable weather proved elusive for Fauve artist André Derain when he visited the capital between 1906 and 1907. Hoping for the fog that permeates Claude Monet's views, Derain instead found that "dismayingly, London has been drenched in sunlight for a fortnight, turning it into another Marseille".

Many of the resulting works are therefore stronger-coloured, sun-drenched delights, including "Londres: la Tamise au pont de Westminster" (1906-07), which Christie's is offering at its Impressionist and Modern auction in London on February 27 (est £6m-£9m, no guarantee). Its sale coincides with Tate Britain's EY Exhibition *Impressionists in London*, in which three Derains feature (to May 7).