A headless archer, a giant serpent made out of jerry cans and a short film that rips off a Britney Spears track – just three of the challenging works that make up one of the V&A's most exciting exhibitions of 2007. Curated by Zoë Whitley of the V&A, 'Uncomfortable Truths – the shadow of slave trading on contemporary art & design' does not feature seventeenth-century pictures of slaves being lynched. Nor does it include dusted down portraits of British abolitionists such as William Wilberforce. And if you are looking for a traditional A-Z history of slavery – you know, A is for abolitionist, B is for black people, C is for chains, that type of thing – I suggest you go elsewhere.

This is a very different, contemporary kind of slavery exhibition. For a start, all the eleven artists featured are living and most, though not all, are black. By avoiding shackles and other obvious imagery, Whitley has put together a show which confronts the very real (though often overlooked) impact the slave trade had on the art and design world. After all, where do you think those Georgian families got the money to create their lovely collections?

The show is not a commentary on slavery, nor is it even celebrating the anniversary of the act of abolition two centuries on. It's doing something much more subtle. "It's about trying not to do the predictable," says Whitley, "There is a certain visual language – fists, chains, shackles – that I think of as being a shorthand for this sort of thing. I wanted to problematise those ways of doing things, and that's what this work does." And so, instead of chains and shackles, 'Uncomfortable Truths' gives us work which is often beautiful, making the connection to slavery even more jarring.

This exhibition's power derives partly from the way that each of the works tackles the legacy of slavery head on, killing a few sacred cows along the way. The video installation by African American artist Michael Paul Britto, for example, shows characters dressed as black slaves dancing to Britney Spears's *I'm a Slave 4U*. Like most of Britto's practice, this piece falls into the Marmite category of art – you'll either love it or hate it. Or you might just hate yourself for laughing.

Less in-your-face, but similarly playful and provocative, is Yinka Shonibare's *Sir Foster Cunliffe Playing* (2006). The work – a headless archer in period costume made from seemingly African textiles – is one of four pieces specially commissioned for the show (the others are by Beninese artists Romuald Hazoumé and Julien Sinzogan and the black British artist Keith Piper). "I felt that slavery was such a horrible thing I didn't want to make something too horrific or too depressing. I wanted somehow to evoke the background to slavery, but not in a literal, direct way," says Shonibare, a Turner Prize nominee in 2004. "I was thinking about the results, the benefits if you like, from the spoils of slavery, and then that got me on to thinking about the merchant classes and the members of the aristocracy who would have enjoyed the money from the slave trade."

The headless archer is rich with meaning: the Cunliffes were a slave-owning family from Liverpool (the city itself was at the heart of the slave trade), while Foster Cunliffe was the founder of an archery club, a leisure activity of the elite classes, made possible by his family fortune. "It's a metaphor for his victims; they were his targets, but not necessarily in a direct way. He is dressed in an eighteenth-century costume made out of African textiles, and I like that paradox," says Shonibare. "I see the fabrics as a metaphor for the global transactions between different kinds of people. Slavery itself is about a transaction between people of different cultures, although it's a terrible one."

The location of Shonibare's piece also reveals the way this

'Uncomfortable Truths' is a series of paintings, installations and sculptures at the V&A that marks the 200th anniversary of slavery's abolition. **Hannah Pool** previews the show, while on the following pages, the artists talk about their work

Are you sitting comfortably?

exhibition sneaks up on you. The elegant archer looks perfectly at home amid the gold-leafed opulence of the restored and re-created Norfolk House music room in the British Galleries, but its overtones are distinctly unsettling. The same applies to the other artworks in the show, which have been strategically scattered amidst the museum's collections instead of being displayed *en masse* in the Contemporary Gallery.

The result is a show that, instead of feeling like an afterthought, permeates every corner of the museum. With his *Lost Vitrines*, for example, Keith Piper has drawn on the language of both the museum and the Enlightenment to create a series of fake-historical cases containing fictitious "documents", some providing suggestions for, say, chaining slaves, others produced by the slaves themselves and outlining strategies for resistance. "I want the *Lost Vitrines* to be precisely that – objects which have been lost, perhaps locked away because they carry an uncomfortable reminder of the relationship between the Enlightenment and the slave trade," explains Piper. "I wanted them almost to disappear within the permanent collection, taking on the appearance of period objects and revealing their true identity only upon close inspection."

The same technique proves effective elsewhere. One minute you are wandering through the John Madejski Garden, or glancing up at a great masterpiece hung on a cool marble landing, the next you are confronted by Hazoumé's imposing serpent (in the garden), or the quiet sadness of the Ghanaian

"Instead of chains, 'Uncomfortable Truths' gives us work which is beautiful, making the slavery connection more jarring"

artist El Anatsui's charred driftwood sculpture *Akua's Surviving Children* (again in the British Galleries). "Contemporary objects are in dialogue with the other collections, so that they create connections with areas of the museum certain people wouldn't even go to," explains Whitley.

The effect can be chilling and disconcerting, but it's never demoralising and sometimes uplifting. And the display strategy also means that even those not heading specifically for the 'Uncomfortable Truths' exhibition will stumble across some marvellous African and diaspora art, particularly in the British Galleries. The technique works particularly well in Lubaina Himid's case. The British artist is displaying more than a dozen of her series of 100 life-sized painted slave figures, *Naming the Money*. Whether it is the two slaves standing next to the grand four-poster bed commissioned by the Earl of Melville (room 54a in the British Galleries), or the one whose reflection you can see in the giant gold mirror in the room devoted to Rococo style (room 53), each of Himid's figures tells his or her own story. After you have spotted a couple, it is impossible not to be on the lookout for more. This has the curious effect of making you realise that even when black people have been rendered invisible in art (or, at best, reduced to holding a bowl of fruit in the background) they were, in fact, present all along.

"I am trying to highlight the fact that those who are oppressed, forgotten, used and abused are actually real people with real lives, feelings and emotions," says Himid. "They have aspirations and ambitions, are creative and may well have had a recognised identity before the trauma of removal, or war, or illness." So does she think of her work as subversive, especially in such a setting? "If it's subversive to portray black people as dignified, creative and knowing, despite a history of struggle and adversity internationally, then yes it is."

'Uncomfortable Truths' is a vibrant, challenging, eclectic response to issues thrown up by slavery. It resists sentimentality. There is no preaching and no hand wringing. Far from making you depressed, ashamed or both, it leaves the imagination positively buzzing with the contemporary relevance of it all. It's a show of which the V&A can be proud, but it inevitably also poses a bigger question: how will the black experience (of which slavery is only one part) be represented at the museum when the uncomfortable anniversary of 2007 has itself become history?

Hannah Pool is a feature writer and columnist on the *Guardian*. Her first book, *My Father's Daughter: A story of race, identity and belonging*, is published by Penguin, £8.99

'Uncomfortable Truths – the shadow of slave trading on contemporary art & design', V&A, London SW7 (0207 942 2000, www.vam.ac.uk), until 17 June

For information about V&A events and the conference about slavery and art and design, please visit www.vam.ac.uk

Yinka Shonibare MBE on *Sir Foster Cunliffe Playing*

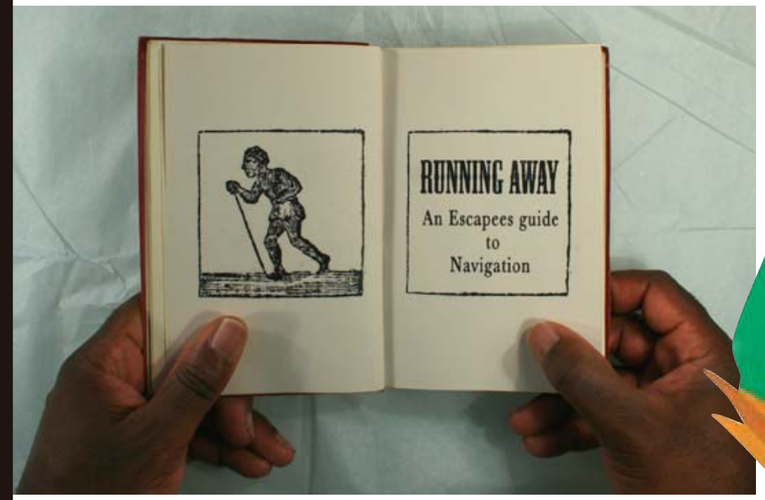
Sir Foster Cunliffe Playing **is a tableau depicting the luxurious pastime of the grandson of a Liverpool slave merchant. A headless sculpture of Sir Foster Cunliffe in an archery pose, the work explores the legacy of slavery rather than a literal depiction of it. The figure is dressed in eighteenth-century costume befitting a gentleman of his social standing, but his clothes are made from African textiles.**

Slave merchants such as Cunliffe made a fortune. He was mayor of the city three times and president of the Liverpool Infirmary. When he wasn't exercising his philanthropic impulses, he sent three or four ships to collect African slaves each year in the 1730s. The city of Liverpool and its inhabitants derived great wealth from the slave trade. It is no exaggeration to say that the grand buildings which grace the city's waterfront and heart today were built with the blood money of slavery.

John Hoppner painted Sir Foster's portrait in 1787. It reveals the subject's great interest: archery. He is depicted standing full length in a wooded landscape, wearing an archer's uniform, with green coat, buff yellow breeches and hessian boots. His archer's plumed black hat rests at his feet.

Left: Yinka Shonibare's tableau *How to blow up two heads at once* features headless figures dressed in period costumes and pointing guns. His work for the V&A will have similar violent overtones. Courtesy the artist and Stephen Friedman Gallery, London

Below: detail from Keith Piper's *Lost Vitrines*. Right and overleaf: *Nilla* and *Kwesi* from Lubaina Himid's *Naming the Money*, 2004. © Lubaina Himid



Keith Piper on *Lost Vitrines*

The *Lost Vitrines* are museum cases filled with objects which float outside the conventional narrative of the eighteenth-century English Enlightenment. There was a dark underbelly to a period known for a boom in crafts and technologies. The rationality and attention to detail characteristic of the era also found expression in complex mechanisms for human trafficking.

The work imagines contexts in which the polite language and meticulous craft values that defined the museum exhibits of the time were also applied to books and objects dedicated to the forcible control of slave populations. It also imagines a parallel set of objects devised and constructed by the slaves themselves. These instruction manuals and toolkits employ the language, attention to detail and rationality of the Enlightenment, but in this case as a means of systematising methods for resisting, disrupting and undermining the plantation systems into which their creators were forcibly bound.

Lubaina Himid on *Naming the Money*

Naming the Money **is an installation of 100 life-sized painted wooden cut-out figures of slave/servants commissioned by the Hatton Gallery in Newcastle for an exhibition in 2004. There are sixteen of them in 'Uncomfortable Truths'. After 25 years of showing and making art that speaks of the lives of those whose histories remain invisible, the knowledge that part of this work will be weaving its way through the beautiful British Galleries of this dazzling museum, which I have adored since childhood, is very important to me.**

Each cut-out has a name, a real name. Each one is able to say who he or she really is and what he/she used to do. Each one lives with his new name and his new occupation, attempting somehow to reconcile the two. Every one of the cut-outs in this installation is trying to tell you something. *Naming the Money* is the story of the slave/servant, but also of the leper, of the refugee, or of the asylum seeker, all of whom make a critical contribution to the cultural landscape of the country in which they live. This is also the story of my struggle to belong in a place I love.

Above: still from *I'm a slave 4U* video by Michael Paul Britto. Below: El Anatsui's *Akua's Surviving Children*, 1996. © El Anatsui, courtesy October Gallery, London

"I hope that by making light of slavery, I make it easier to realise how serious an issue it was" – Michael Paul Britto

Michael Paul Britto on *I'm a Slave 4U*

A friend and curator, Derrick Adams of Rush Arts gallery in New York, posed the question: "What would it be like to take a well-known abolitionist and re-imagine him as a blaxploitation figure?" The original project was supposed to be a movie poster, but I took it a step further and created a trailer and a music video. Although slavery is not a subject to be laughed at, I hope that, in making light of it, I make it easier for people to realise how serious an issue it was. I also hope it makes them re-evaluate the things they accept as "all right" in popular culture.

El Anatsui on *Akua's Surviving Children*

This work uses driftwood found on the beach of Hellebaek, northern Denmark, as part of a re-examination of the Danish Slavery Project conducted between the Gold Coast (now Ghana) and the Danish West Indies from 1670 to 1850. Driftwood's circumstance seemed to parallel that of slaves; both were torn from their land-source into hostile seas, returning with marks from their ordeal. The space in which I worked, the Hammermill, once produced barrels for guns used in the project. Here, I gave the survivors rites of restitution; their heads were scorched in the furnace, then fixed to their bodies with nails handmade in the forge. As burning often relates to the cleansing of curses, this was an act of reversal; a cleansing of abomination. Also, the wood, having experienced the elements of water and wind, only required fire to complete a full cycle. Slavery was about large numbers – the reduction of individuals to mere statistics. The title identifies the work with Ghana, the land of the *Akua-ba* fertility symbol. Numbers large enough to constitute "statistics" must necessarily relate to a fertile source.

Bottom left: Anissa-Jane, *Lucy* from the larger work *The Spirit of Lucy Negro*, 2004. © Anissa-Jane. **Below: Romuald Hazoumé, *Dan-Ayido-Houedo (Rainbow), symbol of perpetuity*, 2006-2007 (work in progress).** Photo: Romuald Hazoumé © the artist, courtesy October Gallery, London

Anissa-Jane on *The Spirit of Lucy Negro*

I believe we are all on this earth for a purpose, and that does not include being made a slave, or being dominated in any circumstances. "Out of many one people" is a Jamaican motto based on the population's multiracial roots that I have been brought up with. I use my art to explore and express uncomfortable truths and reflect on both the struggles of enslaved people and opponents of slavery and the ongoing struggle for equality in the aftermath of emancipation.

Marcus Garvey wrote: "A people without the knowledge of their past history, origin and culture is like a tree with no roots." My art in this exhibition is from a body of work that reflects a journey about my identity and an investigation of my roots and culture. My aim is to challenge pre-set perceptions and celebrate the accomplishments of my forebears, who have lived through and adapted to their changing social situations over the centuries. While an element of my standpoint is that of my identity, being born in Britain with Caribbean parentage, my artwork has wider relevance. It's time to shake off the chains of slavery once and for all. There has been a consistent lack of positive disclosure concerning information and resources relating to African history and the struggle to obtain independence from the British Empire.

Romuald Hazoumé on *Dan-Ayido-Houedo*

Africa has a long history of internal slavery – the trans-Saharan trade – but it is the transatlantic slave trade which is mainly referred to in the present day. We know that the West owes an important part of its seventeenth-nineteenth century economic expansion to the exploitation of millions of Africans who were transplanted to the Americas through collusion with African slave traders.

For 200 years we have been commemorating the abolition of slavery, slavery which our people experienced. But it must be said that today slavery has not disappeared, and that it exists in an insidious and purely economic form. I wish to convey the idea that it is developing and continues to thrive. It has become a serpent which eats its own tail. In Beninese symbology, *Dan-Ayido-Houedo* is the name given to this imaginary serpent, which is represented by the rainbow and considered to be one of the *Orishas* (gods) of the Yoruba Pantheon. It is the symbol of fertility, perpetuity, prosperity and wealth. The body of my serpent has been made with dozens of masks representing all the slaves of the world in all their diverse forms.

"For the millions of men and women who died as slaves, something has been broken that must be repaired" – Julien Sinzogan

Left: Julien Sinzogan's new commission will resemble this earlier work by the artist, *Retour des Esprits*. Photo: October Gallery, London. **Below: *Tribute to Sango* by Tapfuma Gutsa, 2002.** © Tapfuma Gutsa, courtesy October Gallery, London

Julien Sinzogan on *The Gates of Return*

In sub-Saharan Africa, people believe in life after death. When a man dies, his spirit leaves his body and is able to move between the visible and invisible worlds, the realm of the gods. Through *offrandes* (ritual offerings), the spirit can act as an intermediary between the gods and his family. These rituals of memory and prayers also help to maintain a relationship to one's ancestors. Often people bury their dead very close by, sometimes even in their own houses, and build special rooms with altars to which they invite and meet their family spirits.

For the millions of men and women who died as slaves, far from their land and their families in Africa, something strong has been broken, which must be repaired. We know the cities of Zanzibar, Goree, or Ouidah as Gates of No Return. We need a place on earth, in America, in England, in France, Spain, Portugal or Africa, where we can meet History, set up Memory, and where we can talk to the spirits of slaves and pray for them, because there are three ways to die: lost memory, false memory and real death. We need a Gate of Return. Thanks to the V&A, I can try to bring this place about through my painting.

Tapfuma Gutsa on *Ancient Voyages* and *Tribute to Sango*

One uncomfortable truth or another affects me on a daily basis. My work as an artist tries to engage with this reality, amplifying the points of discomfort, analysing consequences and seeking possible solutions.

The sculpture *Ancient Voyages*, a stringed instrument made in the shape of a boat, is a metaphor for the diaspora, describing a multitude of journeys, whether forced or voluntary. Wherever people went, they took with them elements of their cosmos: art, science, music, religion and cuisine. Music has always been the mouthpiece of peoples under stress. What black Americans could not openly speak about was channelled into music. The sculpture is simultaneously an instrument and a boat, thus revealing that the hapless travellers took their god with them and speak to him even today.

Shango, the god of thunder and lightning, went to America as a stowaway hidden in the woolly heads of the human cargo. Shrines in his honour can be found throughout the diaspora. *Tribute to Sango* began as a tribute to a Brighton sculptor, Sango, which means bush or forest, a delicate man who lived life hard and was truly the Son of Shango.

Christine Meisner on *No Apology*

When I first saw the Waterhouse in Lagos, Nigeria, which later became the setting of my video *Recovery of an Image*, the building's origin and almost incomprehensible history immediately drew me in. History became his-story: an individual narrative of the life of Joao Esan da Rocha, who was deported as a young boy into Brazilian slavery and returned to Lagos after his liberation as another person. Da Rocha's story marked the start of my long investigation of the history of the transatlantic slave trade. I talked to descendants of slaves, made the video, made a lot of drawings and travels, read widely, questioned philosophers of the time and searched for who was responsible. But, in the end, I was still left with one persistent question: how could this have happened to us all? As an artist, approaching this phenomenon means putting aside the legitimacy of historical constructions and trying to dissolve the inaccessibility of a past that is still visible beneath the surface of the present.

Below: still from *Recovery of an Image* video by Christine Meisner, 2005. © Christine Meisner. **Above: *Regina Atra* by Fred Wilson, 2006.** © Fred Wilson, courtesy Pace Wildenstein, New York

Fred Wilson on *Regina Atra*

Over the past few years I have been thinking about how the colour and the word black have come to mean many things to us in the West. Its semantics give ordinary words whole new meanings in ways that other colours rarely do. I find it intriguing that "black", in some usages, has shifted from a negative to a positive in my lifetime.

Some people will assign meanings to my black works, others will assume I have a specific meaning in mind, while I imagine a few will be uncomfortable because the use and meaning of "black" is not clear-cut. Still others will look at the aesthetic and perhaps find the black simply beautiful. I am interested in all these responses. As for myself, depending on my mood that day, one or another meaning may be in the forefront. Though my own best response to *Regina Atra* and my other black works is a simultaneous mix of various emotions and meanings.

Regina Atra is a replica in black diamonds and black pearls (rather than white diamonds and pearls) of one of Queen Victoria's crowns. I try not to assign meaning for the viewer by explaining my personal thoughts about the work. However, black as mourning (Queen Victoria's, or ours) and black as representing race, in juxtaposition with the horrendous consequences of the African diamond trade and our oil dependence, which is rooted in "empire", was clearly on my mind. Though all these meanings were simultaneously flowing through me during *Regina Atra*'s creation, I expect others to float to the surface while it's installed at the V&A.