

Colourblind in paradise

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A Decorative triumph, Chris Ofili's exhibition at the British Pavilion is one of the highlights of the 50th Venice Biennale, the world's oldest and most prestigious art exposition.

Five large new paintings and 10 studies are displayed within an interior-design scheme, created by Ofili and architect David Adjaye, and so well conceived that the show could be regarded as a single installation.

Superficially it is all a tribute to African nationalism. Everything - the paintings, the walls, the lighting, the carpets and the specially installed ceiling in the central room - is red, green and black, the colours of the flag of African unity dreamed up by black-rights campaigner Marcus Garvey in the 1920s.

Outside, "Union Blacks" of red, green or black fly on the flagpoles, and on all the paintings the same archetypal African couple embrace in a paradise of dense vegetation, warmed by a trademark Ofili elephant-dung sun.

The work's energy, though, is invested in aesthetics rather than political radicalism. The colour scheme creates a satisfyingly unified feel and Ofili's subjects matter less than their look. Varnished layers of decoration replete with iridescent glitter and oil washes give pleasing depth, while surfaces are dominated by bold, naively rendered figurative forms made up from thousands of dots of acrylic paint.

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In fact, the apoliticism of the work does it credit, helping it stand out in a biennale awash with nauseatingly selfdelusional guff about the power of art. Francesco Bonami, director of this year's event, hilariously prefaces the official catalogue by declaring the exposition to be a symbolic centre of "creative irrelevance that attacks the absurdity of war, violence and discrimination". Ofili's painting won't stop wars, and are unlikely to diminish global violence or discrimination, but they do look nice. ■