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## Slavery, stray dogs and our shared stomach: Liverpool Biennial questions port city's imperial legacy

After a few false starts, the exhibition's 11th edition is finally fully open—and its reckoning with colonial violence has never been more crucial

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Larry Achiampong, Pan African Flag for the Relic Travellers' Alliance (2021). Installation view at Dr Martin Luther King Jr. building, Liverpool Biennial 2021.

After a few false starts, the Liverpool Biennial is finally fully open for its 11th edition, under the umbrella title of *The Stomach and the Port*. Covid-19 put paid to the original dates of July–October 2020, and then the nationwide shuttering of publicly funded museums and galleries meant that only the outdoors projects could be unveiled on a revised opening date in March. But

while the surrounding circumstances may have radically changed, the events of the last year mean that the biennial's central themes are more relevant than ever.

Its title is a direct reference to Liverpool's historic role as a global trade centre that generated vast profits from human trade. This pertains to both the forced movement of enslaved people as well as the products created from forced labour, most notably cotton and sugar.

The port of Liverpool lies at the heart of this biennial, with many sites and projects grappling with its terrible past and legacy. From Rashid Johnson's stacked pair of Black heads cast in bronze, presiding over Canning Dock quayside, to Larry Achiampong's series of pan-African flags fluttering from the bombastic 18th and 19th century public buildings across the city and Xaviera Simmons's lists of American slave holders and Jim Crow era segregation regulations installed in the derelict underground chambers of Liverpool's Cotton Exchange; in myriad ways this biennial ensures that the very fabric of this city is reframed and recontextualised.



Linder's Bower of Bliss (2021) installation view at Liverpool One Photo: Mark McNulty

Echoing through the cavernous, derelict former home of Lewis' department store, Lamin Fofana's sound and light installation, inspired by the infamous 18th-century murder of the human cargo of the slave ship *Zong*, haunts this former symbol of Liverpool's wealth. And Linder's opulent collaged *Bower of Bliss* billboard animates the blandness of the Liverpool One

Shopping Centre with a visual overload of lips, body parts, flora and fauna that serves as a reminder of the city's abundance of commodified goods.

The biennial's curator Manuela Moscoso further extends its scope by drawing analogies between the port and the human body, hence the reference to the stomach. Each is viewed as a place of connection and exchange, both shaping and being shaped by its environment. Bodily references abound, with a particular emphasis on reclaiming bodies that have been overlooked, exploited and marginalised. Corporeal explorations range from Jadé Fadojutimi's wonderfully exuberant paintings of bodies and nature in physical and emotional flux at Bluecoat, to Camille Henrot's brilliant painterly and sculptural explorations of lactating motherhood in the Lewis Building and a range of work in Tate Liverpool that directly challenges white male heterosexuality. Among these are the suggestive symbolism of British Occultist-Surrealist Ithell Colquhoun, the feminist paintings of Judy Chicago and the up-to-the-minute contemporary gestures and phrases filmed by Martine Syms.

The pandemic and the upsurge in protests around Black Lives Matter have made us all too aware of the permeability and contingency of our own bodies and how we are all interconnected, not only to each other but to vast networks of cultural, natural and political systems that we ignore at our peril. Add to this the ongoing attempts of the British Government to prevent museums and cultural organisations from reckoning with the colonial violence embedded in their collections, and it is all too evident that the histories and legacies exposed in this biennial have never been more crucial.