

<b>Institution:</b> Royal College of Art		
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> 32 Art and Design: History, Practice and Theory		
<b>Title of case study:</b> Bringing feminist art to new audiences for the benefit of galleries, artists and publics		
<b>Period when the underpinning research was undertaken:</b> 2012-2019		
<b>Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:</b>		
<b>Name(s):</b>  Tai Shani	<b>Role(s) (e.g. job title):</b>  Tutor, Critical Practice	<b>Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:</b>  2012-present
<b>Period when the claimed impact occurred:</b> 2018-2020		
<b>Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014?</b> N		
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b>		
<p>A series of stand-alone yet interconnected performances, installations and films of monologue texts by Tai Shani from the Royal College of Art has encouraged wholesale reappraisal of feminist interventions in contemporary art practice among curators, artists and the general public. A series of immersive events and exhibitions incorporating performance, installations, films and sculpture was held across the UK and internationally, generating emotional responses to Shani's work as well as acting as a call to activism for audiences. Inspired by Shani's methodology and themes, artists have adopted new ways of working, and galleries have benefitted from new audiences, new approaches to curation and enhanced reputations. Shani's work has also been acquired by galleries and collectors. Shani's research achieved impact both directly among the thousands attending her installations and exhibitions, and among millions through news and social media. The work achieved global attention and fulfilled its own call to action when Shani shared the Turner Prize in 2019, in a symbolic act of cohesion and solidarity.</p>		
<b>2. Underpinning research</b>		
<p>Tai Shani conducts multidisciplinary practice research, comprising performance, film, photography and installation. The core of this work revolves around experimental narrative texts. The scale and scope of Shani's project challenges conceptions of traditional feminist art, which has historically centred on the domestic, craft, DIY and the personal body. Her work considers feminist art practice in light of recent and ongoing rapid political shifts regarding gender, race and class, and how art might contribute meaningfully to these conversations. At the same time the work addresses ways of thinking through personal experiences of gendered violence in the public sphere through the lens of fiction, to enable it to be examined more closely while retaining a sense of vulnerability and rawness.</p> <p>Her four-year long project Dark Continent Productions (named after Freud's description of female sexuality), later renamed DC Productions, proposes an allegorical city of women, which is an experimental and expanded adaptation of <i>The Book of the City of Ladies</i> by Christine de Pizan (1405). Pizan's book includes dialogues with three celestial females, 'Reason', 'Rectitude' and 'Justice', and builds a metaphorical protected city for women, using examples of important contributions women have made to Western civilisation, and arguments that prove their intellectual and moral equality with men. Shani's project draws on multiple additional reference points, including feminist science fiction, post-modern architecture, and feminist and queer theory, to create both a physical and a conceptual space in which to critique contemporary gender constructs and imagine an alternative history that privileges sensation, experience and interiority, undermining hegemonic conceptions of narrative history and proposing visions of post-patriarchal futures.</p> <p>The project involved four years of intensive research, experimentation and production presented in highly visible contexts. Research activity included scholarly investigation of feminist and</p>		

gender theory, long-duration works in cinema, theatre, performance and video, studies of medieval female mystics, Victorian gothic horror, Greek tragedy, witchcraft, feminist sci-fi, overlooked artists and contemporary figures. Shani research practice included advisory sessions with leading relevant artists, workshops with actors and production of particular staging needs. The project aimed to reflect on this practice across a range of platforms and material manifestations, providing a model for creative and feminist research thinking and investigation.

DC Productions articulated this research through stand-alone but interconnected performances, installations and films of monologue texts representing the various characters in the adaptation. In 2018, DC Productions culminated in *DC: Semiramis*, a large-scale, sculptural, immersive installation that also functioned as a site for a 12-part performance series presented over four days at Glasgow International. Each documented episode focused on one of the characters of an allegorical 'City of Women'. *Semiramis* was also presented as an installation at The Tetley, Leeds, alongside a complete archive of the project, including all the films, documentation of performances, texts, posters and a radio play (3.1).

This work also gave rise to *Our Fatal Magic*, a collection of twelve feminist science-fiction monologues delivered by a series of characters, from Medieval Mystics to Cubes of Flesh, from Sirens to Neanderthal Hermaphrodites. Drawing on the speculative narrative strategies pioneered by writers such as Marge Piercy and Octavia Butler, *Our Fatal Magic* metabolises new fictions from feminist and queer theory to propose an erotic and violent space of critique, in which gender constructs are destabilised, alternative histories imagined, and post-patriarchal futures proposed (3.2).

Following *DC: Semiramis*, Shani created *Tragodia* about two old sisters and their very elderly mother (visually gender ambiguous), a ghost, and a cat. The point of view is an intense close-up – as if the viewer were the size of a grain of rice on the face of the characters, reimagining their faces as worlds, their skin as topography, with computer-rendered characters and VR technology facilitating an otherwise impossible depth of field. This project draws on Shani's family history, from her grandmother's failed abortion in the labour camps during WW2, at the end of which her mother was born, through the patriarchal violence of the counterculture, to the present day. In *Tragodia* Shani uses the narrative device of virtual reality combined with sculptural artefacts which are layered like props across a dream-like landscape. She explores the construction of subjectivity, family relationships and the centrality of love and death in a post-patriarchal reality (3.3).

### 3. References to the research

3.1. Tai Shani, *DC: Semiramis*, Hayward Gallery, London, Oct 2014; Schirn Kunsthalle, Frankfurt, September 2015; The Serpentine Galleries, London, May 2016; Tensta Konsthall, Sweden, Mar 2016; Glasgow International, April 2018; The Tetley, Leeds, July 2018; Athens Biennial, Sept 2018; Nottingham Contemporary, Dec 2018; Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, Turin, April 2019; Turner Prize show, Turner Contemporary, Sept 2019–Jan 2020.

**Submitted to REF2021.** Also: *Still I Rise: Feminisms, Gender, Resistance*, an exhibition in three parts, collaboration between Nottingham Contemporary, De La Warr Pavilion (DLWP), Bexhill on Sea, and Arnolfini Arts, Bristol, 2018–2019. The exhibition changed across the three sites, with elements of Shani's work changing with each iteration.

3.2 Shani, T. (2019), *Our Fatal Magic*, Cambridge, MA: Strange Attractor/The MIT Press.

3.3. Tai Shani, *Tragodia*, The Moravian Gallery, Brno, September 2019; Temple Bar Gallery, Dublin, December 2019–February 2020; Graz Kunstverein, Graz, March–August 2020.

**Submitted to REF2021.**

### 4. Details of the impact

*DC: Semiramis* is an overtly political work and an immersive, crafted artistic experience that is socially engaged, accessible and generates debate. Its novelty, political sensibility and immersive qualities have generated impact by inspiring curators and benefitting galleries, artists

and activists, as well as by inspiring a political and emotional response in the public. Between 2018 and 2020 Shani's exhibitions and events were attended by over 240,000 visitors.

### Effect on audiences

When the project was exhibited at the Glasgow International in 2018, it was singled out as the stand-out commission of the festival and was written about extensively in national newspapers and specialist publications, as well as being covered by the BBC. The various iterations have been reviewed in the *Guardian* four times, and in *Art Monthly*, *Frieze*, *Artforum*, *Tank Magazine*, *the Independent*, *The White Review*, *the Telegraph*, *Vogue*, *The White Pube*, *Wire Magazine*, *The Art Newspaper*, *Corridor8*, and *Apollo Magazine* (5.1). The Director of The Tetley noted that she has never worked on a show that was reviewed so extensively (5.2).

Some reviewers acknowledged challenges in responding to the exhibition: a review in the *Guardian* described *DC: Semiramis* as: 'One of the bravest, edgiest works in this year's GI [Glasgow International], it repels as much as it compels', while also listing it as one of the top ten art exhibitions of 2018 (5.1a). Responses to Shani's work from critics, curators, artists and the public are diverse but fall into three groups: responding to spectacle and themes; new ways to understand the world and change the future; and engaging with emotions.

#### *Responding to spectacle and themes*

The scale and ambition of the work and the striking aesthetic combination of visual and political themes generate a response in visitors and others who engage with the work. A separate review of *Semiramis* in the *Guardian* acknowledged: 'Writer, director, costume designer, sculptor and all-round visionary, Shani's chamber of the mind is spectacular' (5.1b). The combination of visual effects with political content was also noted by The Institute of Things to Come: '[...] an evident political agenda but also preserves an aesthetic which has a very strong visual impact' (5.3). The work's combination of film, art, academic and historical thinking, and politics led to Shani's co-curation of a day-long symposium at the Serpentine Gallery, London, for 250 people (5.4). The curator of the Turner Prize 2019 stated that the 'melding of disparate aesthetic and conceptual worlds makes Shani a profoundly important artistic voice right now' (5.5), while the Head of Exhibitions at the De La Warr Pavilion, among other reviewers, artists and curators, noted how this epic approach leads us to consider the potential for creating a better world. The work 'harnesses a fantastical sensibility to think through how we can make our world different and better' (5.6).

#### *New ways to understand the world and the future*

The content and presentation of Shani's work give audiences the space and context to understand the past anew and to consider alternative futures. The exhibition's curator at the Serpentine Gallery, said: 'I think that audiences who have been exposed to Tai's work will have become considerably more engaged with the history of feminism and the history of women across time as a result of engaging in her work... Her work gives audiences the tools to then interpret that knowledge and therefore gives audiences new ways of thinking and understanding the world' (5.4). *Corridor8* noted: 'The scale and ambition of *Semiramis* is impressive in this respect: in a world where women still have to fight for the right to take up space in the world on their own terms, this is a bold and assertive act' (5.1c). For the curator of the Turner Prize 2019, Shani's work 'exemplifies what art can do, to shift or change how one sees the world' (5.5). And for the Head of Exhibitions at the De La Warr Pavilion, the work inspires action: 'The exhibition gave me a sense of hope in acts of resistance which I think is particularly important in the context of our current socio-political reality' (5.6). *Artforum* similarly considered that 'Shani's energetic efforts reflect an impulse to act, and to do so collectively. Progress toward racial and gender equality would have been impossible without spontaneous grassroots activity in small communities, and Shani's work represents a kind of DIY activism, not just to recover the long and rich history of feminist art and thought but to inject it with new urgency and free it from the fixed institutionalized forms it has taken over time' (5.1d). According to the curator at the Serpentine Gallery, 'Her work helps us imagine the future and different possibilities for the future and this is important since how we think about the future influences how we do actually make futures happen' (5.4).

***Engaging audiences' emotions***

The spectacular aesthetic and political content of the work merges with the personal to engender a more intimate response, with audiences recording a powerful emotional reaction. This was noted by curators observing visitors: 'There is an emotional engagement evident in the way audiences respond to her work which is quite rare in the visual arts in my opinion' (Turner Prize 2019 curator, 5.5). 'We had a high number of visitors and many incredible responses, with many people considerably moved' (Temple Bar Gallery, 5.7). Some individuals found it an overwhelming experience: 'I was desperate to escape, but couldn't bring myself to break away. It's the very strong visual which often draws/seduces you into the work and then the very dense, mesmerising and disorientating dialogue which is very powerful, but can leave audience confused or intrigued, and for others it is a quite transformative experience' (Turner Prize 2019 curator, 5.5). 'I was something approaching inconsolable and shell shocked [...] There were elements of it that addressed traumas I have been through that I try and leave on the back seat of my mind, but the way that you handled them left me with hope' (artist correspondence, 5.7). The curator of *Tragodia* at Temple Bar Gallery acknowledged the unexpectedness of this effect: 'It perhaps permitted these feelings to come to the surface in a gallery setting where visitors wouldn't necessarily be expecting to feel that way' (5.8). A reviewer of the exhibition in *This is Tomorrow* described being in tears visiting the exhibition (5.1e). Even *Vogue* noted the emotional response *Semiramis* elicited: 'an effervescent, hypnotic and deeply-moving encounter' (5.1f).

**Benefits for curators and galleries**

Shani's work has also brought benefits to organisations and galleries by leading them to work in new ways. These benefits include enhanced reputations, success in grant applications, and collaborations with other galleries, often internationally, as a direct result of the ambition and scale of Shani's work (5.8). The Tetley benefitted from an enhanced reputation for commissioning successful new work, from high-profile reviews they had not previously received (such as in *Artforum*), and from success in a Jerwood Art Development fund application. 'Undoubtedly, working with Tai was a significant factor in our success in obtaining this grant' (Director of The Tetley, 5.2). Galleries have also benefitted from increased footfall and attracting new and younger audiences. The Turner Prize 2019 curator noted that the multiple routes through which Shani's work is accessed 'can have the effect of bringing newer (and sometimes younger) audiences into contemporary art spaces [...] who might not have felt welcome in more institutional spaces otherwise' (5.5). These routes include social media engagement with Shani's 11,000 followers on Instagram, where her posts regularly get 50–100 comments. The Turner Prize 2019 curator observed: 'She is constantly having a conversation with the public and her work is conceived via collaboration and conversation which is opened as broadly as possible' (5.5). Nottingham Contemporary also noted that the exhibition of Shani's work drew in younger audiences (5.9a). Some curators and galleries built on the ways of working that Shani established by developing similar events. Inspired by the experience of working with Shani, the curator of The Institute of Things to Come, which hosted *Semiramis*, established a new strand of the leading art fair in Italy (Artissima) called New Entries (5.3), while The Tetley used its Jerwood grant to support artists in the north with solo exhibitions (5.2). The Temple Bar Gallery developed work in their artists' studio spaces, which built on physical making and experimentation with materials developed by Shani (5.8).

**Impact on artists**

Shani's work has been an inspiration to other practitioners, in terms of developing both a bold feminist aesthetic and a multi-dimensional methodology. Her work in *Still I Rise* 'was a key moment in developing new understandings of the methodology of feminist art practice. It was a moment of change and Tai's work was a central and integral part of that' (Head of Exhibitions, Nottingham Contemporary, 5.9). Practitioners have changed their activity as a direct result of working closely with Shani, for example during the three-day workshops with Shani run by The Institute of Things to Come in Turin: 'We loved Tai's way of teaching and how she was able to engage the participants enthusiastically in the workshops and get them to produce work in such a short timeframe. Participants come to our workshops from all over the world [...] They go back to their countries and take what they have learnt from our workshops into their future practice so

the influence of these workshops is significant and the reach is international' (5.3). Individual artists reported specific influence on their work: 'At the time [...] I was very turned off by a prevalence of CGI or any practice that relied too heavily on new technologies. Tai's ability to incorporate 3D printing, virtual reality etc. into her work without compromising the overall work has given me the confidence to include technologies I would otherwise wince away from. I accredit this to her understanding of materiality' (5.10). Some artists found the multidimensional element of the work a prompt to action: 'Then I found Tai Shani's work, her practice seemed to seek similar things and it gave me the push I needed to keep challenging my own work and how I would think about my next projects' (5.10). It also affected artists' work thematically: 'Tai Shani's use of allegory and connection with ancient ritual and symbolism has had a profound influence on my sculptural practice.' (5.10); and for another artist whose own realisations were inspired by Shani's work: 'Demands for moderation are usually based on gendered notions of minimalist good taste', as well as by how to 'integrate object-making practice with live work' (5.10).

#### **Public acknowledgement of the work's value**

The Turner Prize aims to promote public debate around new developments in contemporary British art. Shani was nominated for her participation in Glasgow International 2018, her solo exhibition *DC: Semiramis* at The Tetley, Leeds, and participation in *Still I Rise: Feminisms, Gender, Resistance* at Nottingham Contemporary and the De La Warr Pavilion. Reflective of the collaborative and cooperative elements of Shani's work, the nominated artists successfully lobbied to share the prize as 'a collective statement in the name of commonality, multiplicity and solidarity'. Over 140,000 people visited the Turner Prize exhibition at the Turner Contemporary in Margate, making it one of the most popular Turner Prize shows held outside London (5.5). Sharing the Turner Prize altered people's perception of what the prize could be, and 'has succeeded in making it more relevant to new and younger audiences' (5.5, 5.1g). Collectors rarely invest in performance art but the Arts Council England acquired the protocol for Shani's performances: 12 videos of the performances, the script, some of the hand-made costumes, 3D plans for the floor, and some of the hand-made sculptures (5.1h). The work exhibited in Turin was acquired by the founder of the Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo Foundation, who owns one of the biggest collections in Europe, which travels around the world for museum exhibitions once or twice a year (5.3).

#### **5. Sources to corroborate the impact**

- 5.1 Selected media coverage of Tai Shani's work.
- 5.2 Director of The Tetley, Leeds, testimonial letter (2020).
- 5.3 Founder of The Institute of Things to Come, Turin, testimonial email (2020).
- 5.4 Curator of the Serpentine Gallery, London, testimonial email (2020).
- 5.5 Curator, Turner Prize 2019, Turner Contemporary, Margate, testimonial email (2020); and <https://turnercontemporary.org/news/22/01/2020/over-140000-visits-to-turner-prize-2019-at-turner-contemporary/>
- 5.6 Head of Exhibitions, De La Warr Pavilion, Bexhill-on-Sea, testimonial email (2020).
- 5.7 Personal correspondence.
- 5.8 Programme Curator, Temple Bar Gallery + Studios, Dublin, testimonial email.
- 5.9 Former Head of Exhibitions, Nottingham Contemporary, Nottingham, testimonial email (2020); and Audience Report (2019).
- 5.10 Testimonial emails from artists (2020).