# Thematic Displays and Decolonial Strategies: Seydou Keïta and Nicholas Hlobo at Tate Modern

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Since its opening in 2000, Tate Modern has deliberately distanced itself from the chronological "master narrative" that shaped most Western museums throughout the 20th century. By organising the collection into thematic sections, Tate experimented with a different mode of heritage display—one that acknowledges simultaneity, entangled histories, and multiple interpretations of contemporary art. This poster examines that shift through two case studies in the collection displays: Seydou Keïta (2006) and Nicholas Hlobo (2012/14).It argues that thematic rehangs functioned as a decolonial display strategy—not by inserting token "global" works into a Western timeline, but by reconfiguring the framework so that previously unplaceable practices could speak on their own terms.

## Research Questions

- What curatorial strategies enabled Tate Modern to include artists outside the Euro-American canon within its collection displays?
- How did specific rooms (Keïta 2006; Hlobo 2012/14) operate as laboratories for broader institutional change?
- Which theoretical models from postcolonial critique to the notion of "contact zones" (Serota 2000), help interpret these displays as practices of heritage-making rather than neutral arrangements?

## Research Method

Research conducted at the **Tate Archive** for the PhD. Analysis of the three major rehangs, including press reviews, press releases, archival materials, room lists, curatorial statements, correspondence, photographs, and both public and private documents. Reconstruction of the contemporary **critical debate**.

## Results

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## Rehang

**2000**

. Thematic structure: *History/Memory/Society; Nude/Action/Body; Landscape/Matter/Environment; Still Life/Object/Real Life*.
. This approach abandoned a chronological narrative in favor of thematic strands, enabling radical juxtapositions (e.g., Monet with Minimalism).
. The use of traditional genres rooted in the French Academy (18th century).
. Aim: to test how classical genres could be reinterpreted through contemporary art, expanding the scope of their meaning.

**2006**

. Thematic structure: *Material Gestures; Poetry and Dream; Energy and Process; States of Flux*.
. In parallel, the display emphasized key movements (Surrealism, Minimalism, Postwar Abstraction, Cubism/Futurism/Vorticism) and expanded the use of diverse media such as photography, film, video, and archival material.
. The abandonment of chronology created cross-generational dialogues, while monographic rooms—such as the one dedicated to Seydou Keïta—acted as points of flexibility within the overall display.

**2012-2014**

. Thematic structure: *Poetry and Dream; Structure and Clarity; Transformed Visions; Energy and Process*.
. Strong focus on radical practices of the 1960s–70s, on Artist Rooms, and on new acquisitions from beyond the Euro-American axis (e.g., Hlobo, Chen Zhen, Leonilson).
. Frequent room rotations reinforced the idea of a "permanent collection permanently changing."

**Case Study I — Seydou Keïta**
**(curated by Cliff Lauson with André Magnin, 2006)**

50 portraits (Bamako, 1949–63) within *States of Flux* alongside Cubism, Futurism, Pop.
Thematic model enabled inclusion beyond Euro-American genealogies, focusing on agency and social history rather than ethnography.
Monographic room acted as a test bed for integrating non-Western practices into the collection display

**Case Study II — Nicholas Hlobo**
**(curated by Kerryn Greenberg, 2012/14)**

*Balindile I* (2012), tyre inner tubes stitched with ribbon, presented in *Energy and Process*.
Explored Xhosa identity and queer desire through material tensions (industrial/domestic, masculine/feminine).
Positioned within global dialogues of process and matter, expanding acquisitions beyond Euro-American contexts.

## Conclusions

The cases of Keïta and Hlobo show how thematic displays expand museum narratives by allowing non-Western practices to speak on their own terms. Introductory pairings and monographic rooms open constellations of meaning and enable diverse genealogies to enter the discourse. Such strategies align European museums with a global responsibility to narrate modernity as entangled and contested rather than linear and universal.