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ISSN 2755-3744



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All Black Connect, Panya Banjoko, Mac Collins, De'Anne Crooks, Dr. Jareh Das, James Denham, Janiva Ellis, Taya Francis, Jade Foster, Julia Grosse, Jenna Jones, Nnena Kalu, Yadichinma Ukoha-Kalu, Yvette Mutumba, Ada M. Patterson, Hannah Kidane, Donald Rodney, Jazz Swali, Belema Wellington, Natifah White, Sofia Yala.

ABC Magazine – The Red Issue

This is All Black Connect

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Funded by

Freelands Foundation

Cover

Photographer & Creative Director: Aaron Paul Walker
An ABC member wears 'The Red Issue' jumper by Taya Francis
Production Support: Jazz Swali
Location: Backlit Gallery, Nottingham (UK)

Published by Beam Editions and New Art Exchange
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ISSN 2755-3744

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A Beginning of a Journey

ABC Magazine's Red Issue embodies a practice of imagining otherwise.

We imagine a sector of dynamic art publishing that puts front and centre, waywardness. We encourage waywardness that has the potential for authenticity, an attitude that is positively received, resistant to settling, and not limited by the need for conformity. Wayward in this context could be an approach where writing, and points of view on contemporary art and culture, are sometimes unpredictable or unexpected. Practices, opinions, and expressions shouldn't fall neatly into categories.

We imagine the reoccurrence of distinctive art writing, criticism, and intersectional perspectives on culture from many with and without a platform.

We imagine going against the grain of the Establishment; what and who we persistently see on the pages of magazines. By the Establishment, we mean longstanding British contemporary art magazines, full of the same tastemakers and ideas that are recirculated; too concerned with notoriety and gatekeeping; busy with retaining cultural capital; and where everything is signed-off by majority-white, middle-class editorial management. ABC magazine doesn't aim to compete. We strive to open the door, walk in, and take up the space which has always been rightfully ours, and so many others'. We encourage everyone interested in this business to do the same.

Publications have the strong possibility to develop formative experiences and opportunities in an inaccessible and exclusionary art world. As a collective, we feel there is a reluctance for the sector to bring art to someone's doorstep – inner-city neighbourhoods, non-capital cities, villages, and towns – and equally, produce culture *from* someone's doorstep. This concern has informed our way of thinking as we highlight hyperlocal and global perspectives *on our doorstep, to the global field*. We value the world-class culture, art practices, and ideas generated in Nottingham. At the same time, in this issue, we seek commonality, difference, and synergy between, for example, the many initiatives and artists from or engaging with São Paulo – Benin City – Berlin – Lisbon – London, and of course, Nottingham.

As a starting point for the conceptualisation of ABC magazine, we reflected on the meaning of 'Primary' in its many definitions: the first in order of time or development; basic, fundamental, direct, first-hand; preparatory to something else in a continuing process. For example, primary colours, and primary education.

Red is a primary colour and is far from neutral in expression and meaning. Most of the contributions aren't written from a place of neutrality or one perspective, much like this Editorial. As people, we belong to many worlds, communities, and places, and our opinions are not fixed nor singular. Red trickles throughout the magazine in subtle and overt ways, from the design and artworks to the images and contributions. Red evokes feelings of magic, good luck, and passionate love, and reminds us of war and bloody histories.

For the cover, we commissioned artist Taya Francis of Knit & Ting to reflect on this and create a wearable artwork to mark this issue. The 'Red Issue' jumper is inspired by images Francis took in Jamaica (her ancestral home) of soldiers on the back of an army pickup truck. As an artist of the Jamaican diaspora, she draws together camo patterns and style influences from musicians Peter Tosh and Yellowman, alongside

scripted, hand-painted typography still seen on shop signs – such as the classic Red Stripe iconography.

Culture is at once familiar and extraordinary, and art should conjure up the same feeling. There is an overwhelming tone of open questioning and self-observation running through the writing in the magazine. Within these pieces there lies a joyful and eerie sense of familiarity when reading, and a sense of shift and playfulness – a moving forward whilst also reflecting back. All the contributors are open to questioning and challenging what they think they know. The ethos of this issue is very much about resisting and rejecting forms of logical fallacies: The Bandwagon Fallacy, The Appeal to Authority Fallacy, Straw Man, an Appeal to Ignorance.

In primary school, we learn our ABCs, the first letters of the alphabet. At that age, we are impressionable, and every experience is formative. With this initial magazine, we want to bring you on a journey with us while we continue to encounter art and arts education while developing formative experiences alongside you.

Journeys is also the theme for our features, reflecting on fluctuating and complex transnational stories and the contributors' relationship to place

Panya Banjoko's essay *Don't Blame the Blacks* maps her journey for justice, as curator, with Nottingham Castle and highlights the importance of communities standing together as allies. She explores this from the position of speaking out against discrimination and developing a campaign for equality, diversity, and inclusion in the arts and heritage sector. In *Water as Territory*, Sofia Yala and Jade Foster reflect upon the work of Brazilian artist Rosana Paulino, the importance of archiving, and forced and migratory journeys across the water. In *biting the bullet*, artist and writer based between Barbados and Rotterdam, Ada M. Patterson writes a review/letter/elegy honouring Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley's practice and her exhibition *SHE KEEPS ME DAMN ALIVE* at arebyte Gallery. Patterson speaks to the power afforded through archives, and yet the agency found in not being archived/archivable, and honours the tension between these potentials.

Dr. Jareh Das's interview with Lagos-based artist Yadichinma Ukoha-Kalu speaks of the processual curiosity that has driven her practice and looks to past histories and artmaking in Nigeria to think about the future. Additionally, Das spotlights the artist Nnena Kalu and her vortex drawings. Kalu is mostly non-verbal and autistic working in a processual manner, which sees her bind layers of materials together to create drawings, paintings, and small or monumental sculptures. In recent years, Kalu presented solo exhibitions at Glasgow International in 2018 with Project Ability; Humber Street Gallery, Hull in 2019; and 'elsewhere', Studio Voltaire's offsite programme in 2020; and in 2021, she was part of Yinka Shonibare's curated Royal Academy Summer Exhibition. In 2022, she has featured in the group exhibition To all the Kings who have no Crowns curated by Jennifer Gilbert of Jennifer Lauren Gallery at Carl Freedman Gallery.

The editors-in-chief have taken the time to interview a range of practitioners to understand their journey in the art world: Nottingham's multi-award-winning emerging designer and artist Mac Collins; Birmingham based artist De'Anne Crooks; Julia Grosse & Dr. Yvette Mutuma, Founders and Artistic Directors of the multimedia platform *Contemporary And* (C&) based in Berlin; and Nottingham artist and knitwear designer Taya Francis who has recently designed a jumper for Wales Bonner, "Togetherness" AW/22.

Ahead of her presentation at the anticipated 13th edition of the Bamako Encounters – African Biennale of Photography, Sofia Yala shares *The Body as an Archive* photo series. Artist Jazz Swali presents a

commissioned photo series of Nottingham based artists Kim Thompson, Shadia Houssein, and editor-in-chief Jenna Jones.

Interviews, features, artist spotlights, reviews, photo stories, and personal essays address how accumulated stories and culture exist outside our immediate environment. The thread which connects all the work featured in ABC magazine is a specific interest in archives and archiving. What is the importance of archives in the world of magazines which moves fast and a world that moves faster? How does the accumulation of different cultural perspectives or the encounter with other places change how we position ourselves in relation to where we live and work?

We will leave you to ponder this last set of thoughts.

This sector is inequitable. This sector is unfair. The UK visual arts sector is seen as uncaring, self-serving, and distastefully competitive. Yet we are hopeful because you picked up this magazine to begin imagining otherwise and to seek un/familiarity. We hope you turn the page feeling a sense of intimacy and want this magazine's journey to continue. Watch this space.

– All Black Connect Magazine & Jade Foster

I visualise myself sipping oat milk hot chocolate in a gallery café in the city, with a low background buzz of people chatting on a crisp Saturday afternoon as I write about my journey as a curator for ABC's (All Black Connect) debut magazine. In this café I am basking in the warm glow of the invitation to contribute to a new and much needed publication. In this vision, I have no time pressure or concern about the responsibilities attached to being a Black woman in this city. I am free to create and curate at will. But the dream is just that – a fantasy. Instead of doing what others may have the privilege to do, I sit fixed on my settee, hunched over my MacBook, grabbing minutes between preparing for a protest. Designing flyers, tweeting, posting, planning, and urging people to stand with me against structural racism – and many do – this is what occupies my being and is my 'new normal'.

*Today wasn't as bad as yesterday.
Yesterday I didn't have the strength to
press my fingertips
to the keyboard of my Mac*

Fallout from the insidious treatment I received after my curation of the *Don't Blame the Blacks* exhibition at Nottingham Castle Museum persists eight months later. What should have been a moment of celebration for the people raised to prominence by the exhibition and for the wider Nottingham community soon deflated like a punctured tyre. *Don't Blame the Blacks* was an acknowledgment of the Black community's contribution to the city's economy in the 1950s, recognition of the toil and labour of employees of the UK's largest and most well-known bicycle manufacturer, Raleigh Industries, and evidence that they campaigned until Raleigh employed Black workers and afforded them parity with white workers. As founder of Nottingham Black Archive (NBA), I work to 'keep Black history in the present' via my curation of the multiple local stories it holds. Yet, I find myself still challenging racial discrimination, an unfortunate and inevitable reality for Black British citizens in the UK. In 1956, Oswald George Powe, community activist and teacher, used a powerful imperative, 'Don't Blame the Blacks' because Black people were being scapegoated for employment issues, housing shortages, and overcrowding in schools. Sixty-six years later, I issue the same challenge, 'Don't Blame the Blacks!'

*The personal price may be high
but the need for change is paramount.
This is what I tell myself
as I lie awake at 3am.*

I should be exploring how objects can be displayed creatively in gallery spaces. I should be deepening my skills in situating Black cultural history at the heart of museums and galleries and working with prominent Black artists, like Keith Piper and Vanley Burke. Instead, I find myself having to develop yet another campaign for equality, diversity, and inclusion in the arts and heritage sector and I am teaching myself how to breathe deeply to address the stress of the situation.

I've begun to shape a career as a curator of Black history locally and nationally, recovering the hidden histories of Black soldiers in World War I for *We Will Remember Them* in 2017, supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, was a highlight. As the exhibition toured around Nottingham, Derby, and Leicester, before closing at Black Cultural Archives in London, I never imagined I would need to defend my right to be treated respectfully as a curator five years later. George Floyd's public execution in 2020 is believed to have created awareness and a deeper understanding of systemic and institutional racism, but has it? And if it has, does it extend into all sectors?

*Today I stopped outside a church,
paused for a while,
wondered if I entered
would they welcome me.*

Structural racism does not live in the very walls of the castle; bricks and mortar do not speak and cannot act. People do. They uphold a castle's frame and fame as trustees and keepers of its history. But people, even when holding titles, honours, and awards, can fail and feel untouchable. And why shouldn't they, when other people who are in positions to challenge such flaws, fail to do so? After beginning my work as a community archivist, I did not imagine my role would extend to curating Black cultural history in mainstream spaces, and seeing community members radiate pride for being acknowledged, as they did when I curated *Journeys to Nottingham* at Nottingham Trent University's Bonington Gallery (November 2019 to February 2020). Sharing the Windrush generation's narratives of arrival in the city amplified their voices and ensured that individuals like the late Arabelle Smith received the credit she has always deserved, as a founder member of the city's first Black education and cultural hub – the Association of Caribbean Families and Friends, a foundation for Black arts and culture founded in the 1970s – as George Powe should for fighting a 'colour bar' in the city in the 1950s. These are some of the many foundations on which subsequent generations could build.

*My neck has decided to forgo the
ability to turn
without shooting spasms that race
through my brain,
breathe, breathe, breathe...*

Nottingham has a long Black activist history. Organisations founded to address racial injustices come and go. But clear and unequivocal equity continues to elude us. Nottingham Castle's failure to act according to its safeguarding policy during an incident in the summer of 2021 required an independent investigation and the critical findings of the investigators should open up a dialogue between the Castle and the city about how to dismantle racism. But will it? Whose responsibility is it to work towards dismantling racism and how might it be achieved?

*The radio is crackling in the background...
the voice indecipherable...
we must find a station that can speak
for us all...*

Black, Brown, and white people have taken it upon themselves to share the burden of this campaign with me. They have shown solidarity by writing letters of concern, boycotting the Castle, and standing by my side on the 5 March 2022. And although my allies are many – old and young – people come and go as their own personal responsibilities take precedence and their attention wanes leaving me to fear that support may cease completely. But, as one person departs, another steps forward to take their place and each person who walks a stretch of this journey with me helps to ensure me that I can continue to keep moving forward on the quest to ensure that the Castle acknowledges its role in perpetuating systemic racism.

There are several organisations in Nottingham promoting an anti-racist agenda, a branch of Stand up to Racism, a national initiative that tackles racism and Islamophobia backed by individuals in the government and state. Next Gen Movement, a Black female-led organisation founded in June 2020 after the murder of George Floyd. The focus of their movement is to fight against racism, empower youth, and be a voice for the community. Communities Inc, which engages with the most marginalised communities to promote their voices and their needs, influence people and policy at all levels, and to implement realistic and sustainable solutions. And new ones currently being established such as the Race Equality Justice Council Nottingham, led by Black, Asian and other people of colour to tackle racism across Nottingham and Nottinghamshire. There are also many allies such as the brave Staff of Colour at the Castle who risk their livelihood for justice, and Contemporary Visual Arts Network East Midlands (CVAN EM), which celebrates and supports arts and culture in the region, fostering an inclusive long-term future for the sector, emphasising equity and access for all arts workers – CVAN EM penned a public statement demanding inclusion and accountability

of the Castle. It shows we have the will, the desire for change, and the compassion and the empathy that is needed as a city to make it a better place for us *all*.

As a victim of racism, I not only see the good that people are doing to seek demonstrable change, but I am also experiencing how we work as a community. While the work that each group undertakes is necessary, there are gaps in the links of our chain and those gaps leave me wondering if, or when, support will cease as priorities change. Battling structural racism is difficult, and when we are entrenched in fighting we rarely take time to come up for air, but we need to make time so that when we do, we may learn from one another, share expertise and skills collectively, and become stronger as a result. If our links are joined together carefully, then curation of Black history could become less of a battlefield and more of a celebration. This is a lesson we must pass on to the next generation of curators and activists.

*The young look on today
tomorrow they will have to decide
whether to hold their tongues
or to sharpen them for war.*



PANYA BANJOKO

Water as Territory

Recently, Sofia Yala has been thinking about water as both a territory and an amorphous border. Water can be pure and crystalline; however, the ocean, it can be said, is not so 'pure' with the histories and voyages it has been tainted by – the transatlantic slave trade, the violence of colonialism and imperialism. This fascination with the violent encounter between history, race, and biology is an essential exploration within the practice of Brazilian artist, Rosana Paulino. Her piece *A Permanência das Estruturas* (2017) and the solo exhibition *Atlântico Vermelho* (Red Atlantic) speak to the brutality inflicted on racialised bodies during enslavement. Social death¹ is a phenomenon that occurs when the social existence of a person or group ceases or is compromised and/or lost. In this work, Paulino stitches together a plan image of what could be read as the British slave ship *Brooks* with ethnographic imagery. The text repeats the words 'permanência das estruturas', meaning 'permanence of structures' in English, alluding to a hauntology of Portugal's subjection of humans, with the cutout in combination suggesting an absence or significant loss of ancestral names and social identities that were known before colonisation.

The Portuguese Empire was one of the longest-lived in Europe with Macau being transferred to China in 1999, marking its end. In the present day, the country's 'heroes of the sea' are celebrated in the opening words of the national anthem. The narrative told in the UK, focuses on the exploitation of people in the Global South including Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean by Britain and America, yet there is little awareness of the extent of Portugal's involvement within the transatlantic slave trade in mainstream discourse.

Some works in Paulino's broader practice incorporate family photographs, using 'critical fabulation' to look at how the artist's personal history and cultural memory, intersects with the phenomenological history of Brazil. Cultural historian Saidiya Hartman coined the term 'critical fabulation' to develop a methodological tool that uses storytelling and speculative narration to redress battered and unrecoverable histories, particularly regarding enslaved people. As a methodological 'contaminate', she aimed to 'jeopardize the status of the event, to displace the received or authorized account, and to imagine what might have happened or might have been said or might have been done.'² Water and sea have historically been weaponised, yet remain a bountiful provider of spiritual and physical nourishment for Indigenous peoples, as well as for emancipated communities in former colonial territories across the world. Water is essential in the healing and survival of living organisms and remains a sacred entity and resource for countless communities enfolded by it.



SOFIA YALA &
JADE FOSTER

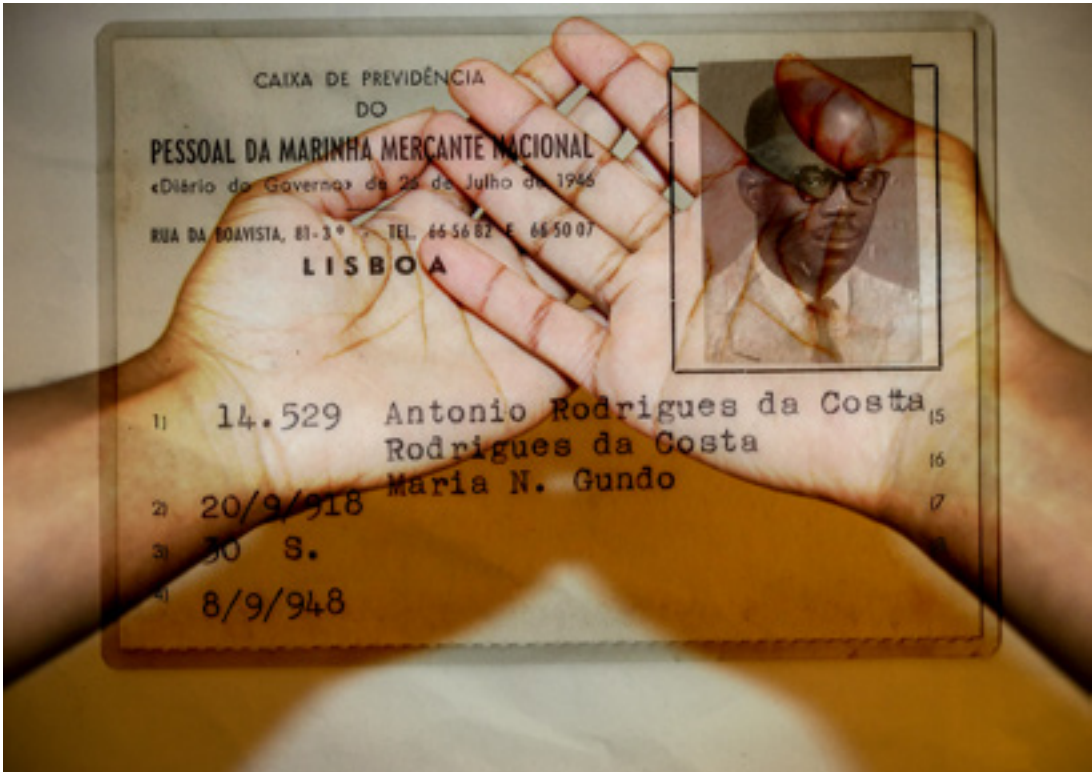
Reinstituting or centring non-western theory, epistemology, narrative, and myth allows a deviation of Western countries' infliction on Indigenous communities, particularly Portugal in this context. Dichotomy and non-western mythology are explored in Paulino's recent book, published by Familia Editions, *Buffalo and Lady of Plants*:

The Buffalo is strong, vain, and powerful. She is a mother who feels no guilt and is not punished for having pleasure and being independent. When necessary, she goes to war and fights as an equal with men. This deity reminds the many black women who have been battling from an early age and for centuries. Lady of Plants, on the other hand, is the owner of life – she creates and heals. From her orifices sprout fine roots. Some of them are Jatobas, in reference to the ancient Brazilian tree, witness of our history. Wise women, they are like the matriarchs who kept the black culture standing despite the attempts to erase it. Rosana is herself a Jatoba. A source of affection and knowledge.

¹ Jana Králová has identified three characteristics often found in definitions of social death, each of which suggests that the concept represents compromised well-being. These are: a loss of social identity; a loss of social connectedness; and losses associated with disintegration of the body. For more on Social Death, see E. Borgstrom, 'Social Death', QJM: An International Journal of Medicine 110, no. 1 (1 January 2017): 5-7, <https://doi.org/10.1093/qjmed/hcw183>.

² Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', Small Axe 12, no. 2 (June 2008): 11, <https://doi-org.libproxy.ucl.ac.uk/10.1215/-12-2-1>.

Sofia Yala's *The Body as an Archive* is a series of ephemera and photographic collages that uses similar methods to those found in the work of Rosana Paulino, who Yala sights as an influence on her photographic practice. Implicating herself within the work, she uses her body to explore gesture, pose and body language to develop what Yala calls a living, 'walking archive'. Her work is self-referential, exploring how her racialised body was subjugated and restricted during the lockdown periods in the COVID-19 pandemic. Residing in a territory surrounded by water: an island, the United Kingdom; she calls to attention Portugal-UK relations and shared histories. Alongside other political discussions around Brexit, borders, and limited movement, her grandad's ephemera was an escape or tool for comprehending her family's migration. This enabled her to reflect on the journey that led her to Derby in the present day. Yala is suggesting that we think about the significance of the journeys we make whilst deeply comprehending what has come to pass, what has been lost, and what remains.

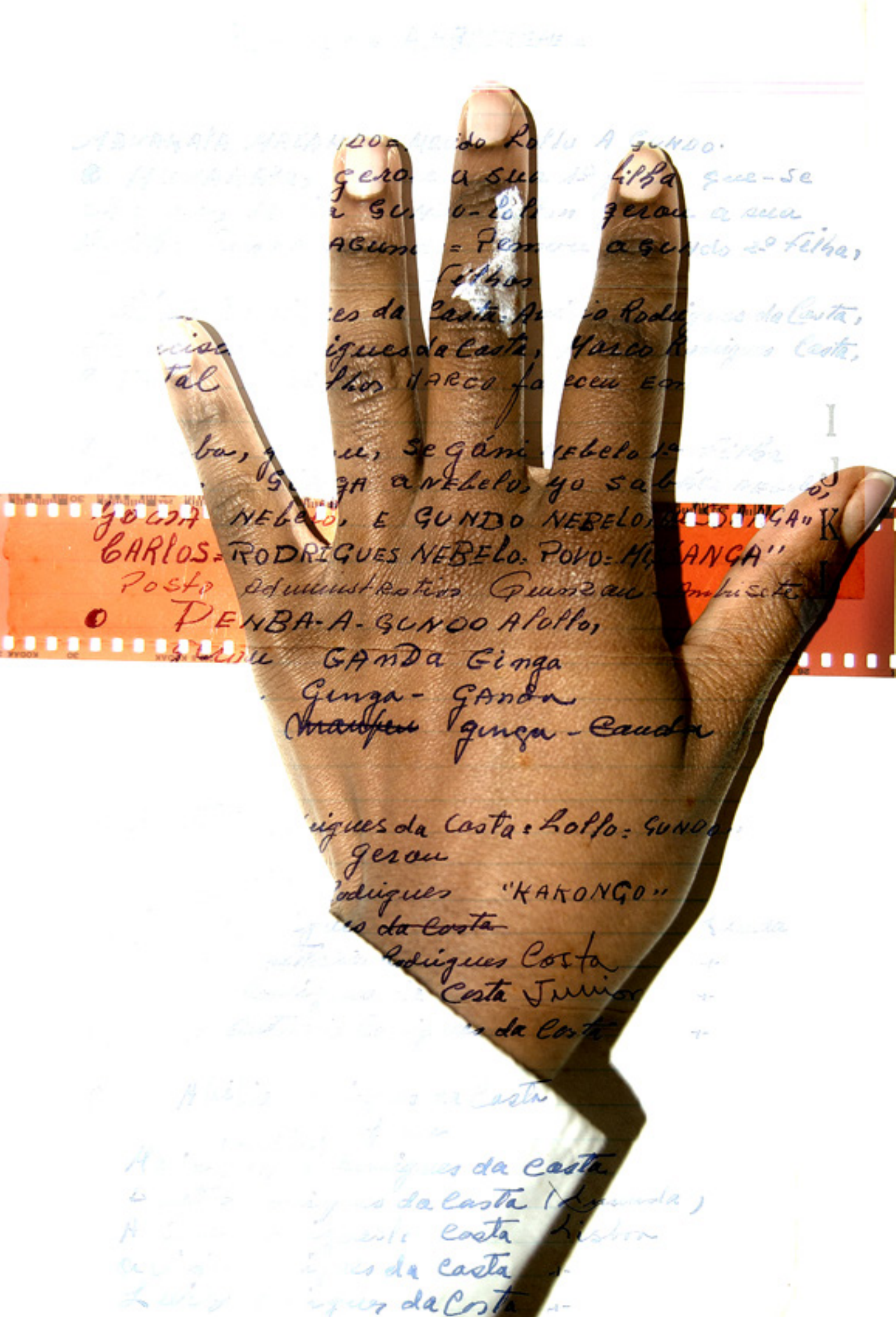


The Body as an Archive, 2021, digital collage



The Body as an Archive, 2021, digital collage



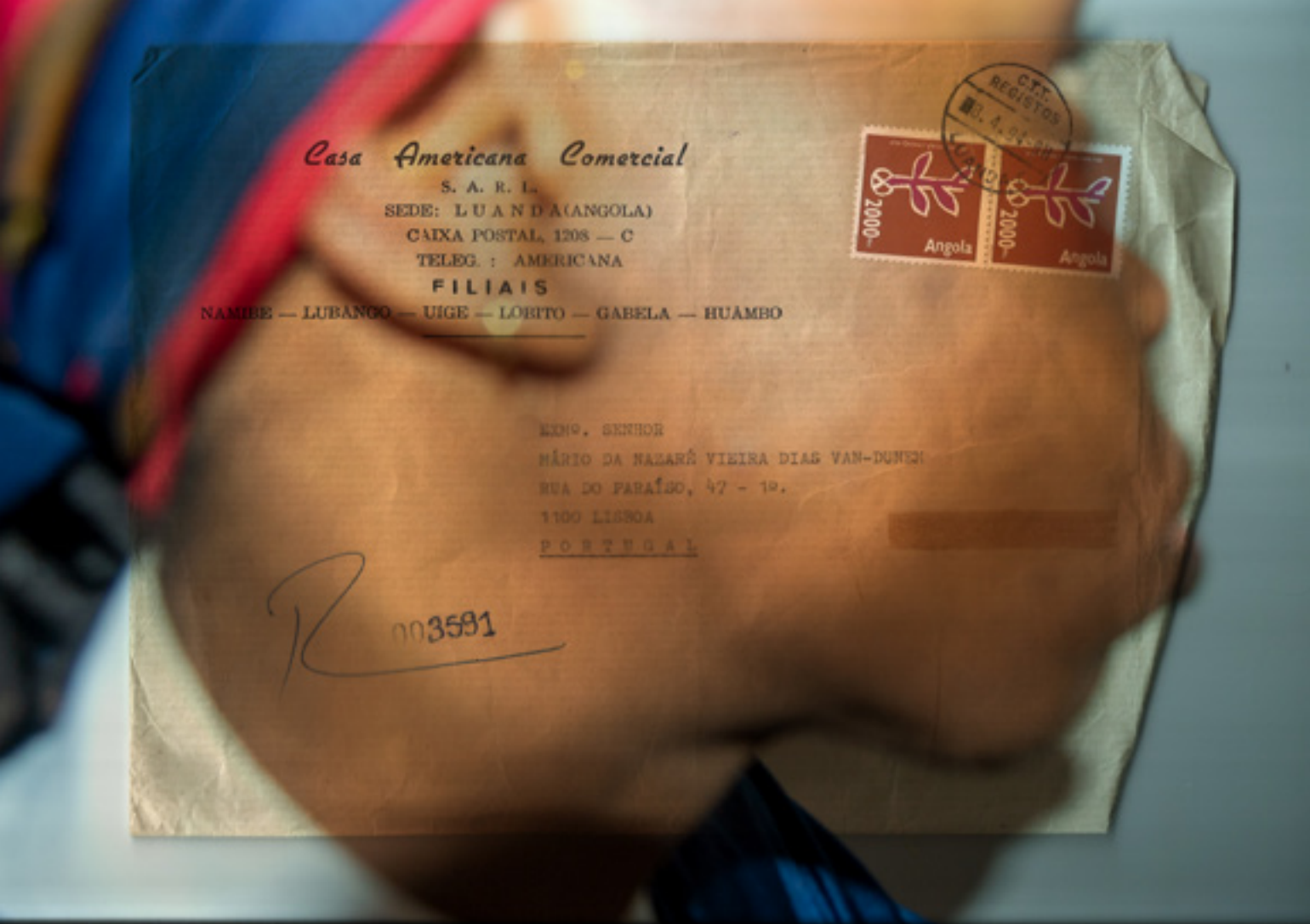


My grandparents (maternal and paternal) were both ship workers between the 1940s and 1980s for Portuguese and international companies. This was due to the lack of Portuguese labour force willing to work physically demanding and dangerous jobs. The Portuguese maritime companies started gradually accepting African workers for the machine sections onboard ships. Serving these companies that crossed the Atlantic was truly a terrifying experience, not only because of the hard labour but also because of the rampant racial discrimination, even though this was the only way to escape the colonial atmosphere left ashore. The possibility of mobility offered them the opportunity to bring their families to Portugal or other Western countries.

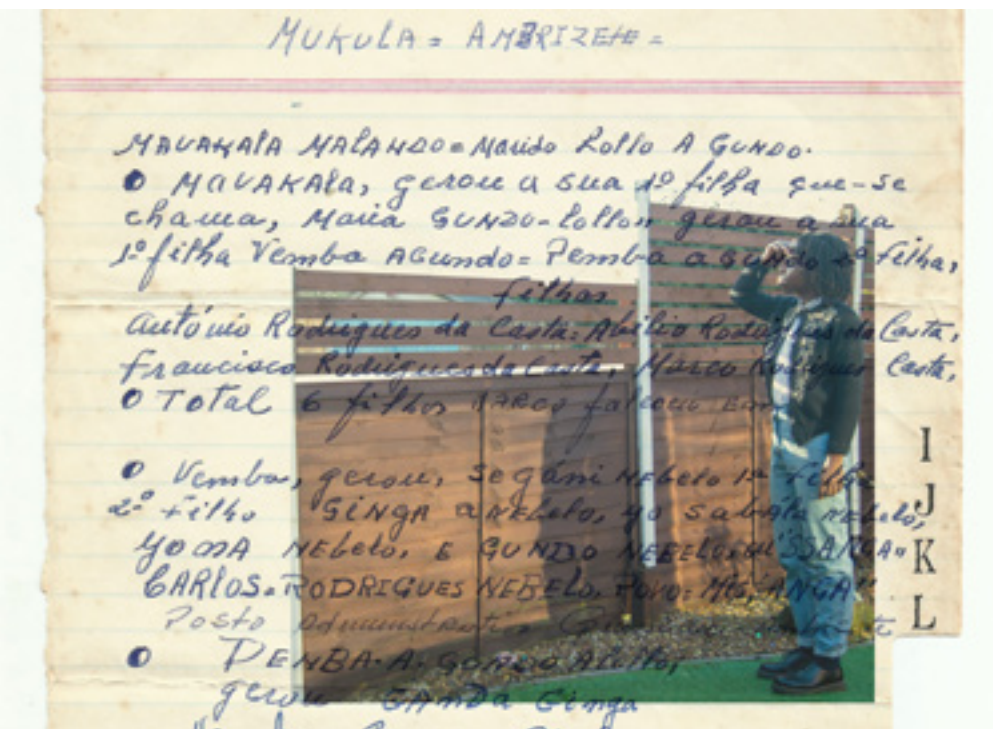
I found my paternal grandfather's archives in a suitcase, which contained private notes of his children's birthplace, dates of birth, full names, official documents, and international mail. Gradually, I started taking self-portraits to document my creative process; the hands collect, search, touch and feel textures. The method of posing in front of a wall, performing the limitations and consequences of forced migration, on the other hand, facing the door symbolises the beginning of a new journey or the antithesis.

The collaging remaps a parallel space of transgenerational realities where we can witness two lives tied to history in their own times – incorporating the ideas of home on both land and sea. The domestic spaces present the ground of several lineages as the place of home across the complex, layered diasporic realm.

– Sofia Yala



The Body as an Archive, 2021, digital collage



Os meus avôs (materno e paterno), ambos trabalhadores das companhias de navegação entre os anos 40 e 80 em companhias portuguesas e internacionais. Por falta de mão de obra portuguesa, disposta a um trabalho fisicamente severo e perigoso. As companhias portuguesas marítimas foram gradualmente aceitando trabalhadores africanos nas secções de máquinas a bordo destes navios. Servir estas companhias que atravessaram o Atlântico revelava uma experiência seriamente apavorante, não só devido ao pesar das condições laborais como à austera discriminação racial que se fazia sentir . Porém esta foi para muitos a única possível saída da atmosfera colonial, a possibilidade de mobilidade ofereceu-lhes a oportunidade para trazerem as suas famílias para Portugal ou para outros países europeus.

Eu deparei-me os arquivos do meu avô paterno numa mala de viagem – apontamentos com os locais de nascimento dos filhos, datas de nascença, nomes completos, documentos oficiais e correspondência internacional. Progressivamente comecei a fotografar-me de forma a documentar o meu processo criativo; as mãos recolhem, coletam, indagam e tateiam texturas. O processo performativo de pose em frente a uma parede, apresenta as limitações e consequências de migração forçada, por outro lado, encarar o portão simboliza o começo de uma jornada ou o inverso. Esta serie re-mapa um espaço paralelo de realidades transgeracionais, onde podemos testemunhar duas vidas coesas à história dentro dos seus contextos e formatos – incorporando a ideia de casa em ambos: solo e imensidão marítima. Os espaços domésticos apresentam o solo de múltiplas linhagens como o lugar de casa neste edifício de transmutados andares e uma multiplicidade de narrativas, o que faz a diáspora.

– Sofia Yala
(Translated by Carolina Rito)



The Body as an Archive, 2021, digital collage

biting the bullet

ADA M. PATTERSON



Ada M. Patterson On
SHE KEEPS ME DAMN ALIVE by
Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley

arebyte Gallery, London

I've never really liked playing first-person shooters. I've never been good at them either. I've never enjoyed the brutal simplicity of gunfire – the CLAP CLAP CLAP of bullets making holes in bodies where holes ought not to be. I don't like the sound. I don't like the premise of any weapon that thins the already paper-thin margin between life and death. Especially in games with unlimited ammo, shooting enjoys an obscene kind of ease so far removed from the glamour of a spell-book or the limited affordances of MP, mana or magic. I have never understood the fun players find in the act of shooting. I have never understood how easy it is for players to become trigger-happy. Trigger-happy? I don't know her. I'm trigger-nervous. Trigger-hesitant. Trigger-critical. Hell, maybe I'm just fucking triggered.

All this being said, Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley's *SHE KEEPS ME DAMN ALIVE* – a game where you must use a gun to protect Black Trans life – is posing such a complicated challenge for me. And not because of my feelings around first-person shooters. No, it's complicated and confronting because no matter how trigger-nervous I am, this game demands action. Here (but really, not only here), inaction is complicity in the violence against my own community and I don't have a leg to stand on. In the exhibition-text-meets-game-manual, I'm reminded of 'the possibility space of the game – how players prioritise and play with the affordances given to them'. What are the affordances given to me as a player? I'm given stakes. Personal stakes. Stakes that make me feel too close to even write about this. Stakes that demand I shoot because the life-worlds of my community hang in the balance. The balance of my aim, my discerning eye, my duty to show up. A balance tempered by the knowledge that shooting will always be the choice to end a life.

Entering the space, I'm briefed by Health and Safety, a video manual thick with all the questions and consequences I should carry with me when playing this game.

DO YOU THINK YOU HAVE THE POWER TO PROTECT OTHERS? WHAT GIVES YOU THIS POWER? ARE YOU EXCITED TO HOLD THE GUN? WILL THE GUN MAKE YOU FEEL POWERFUL? ALL THEY DO IS LET YOU TAKE POWER FROM OTHERS...



To my right, I'm greeted by a sculpture – a billowing ghost of red brocade with golden eyes and a knitted balaclava face. This ghost feels like an ancestor, or maybe even a demon. There is an offering of tablets in its many hands, each filled with information on some of the characters living in the game ahead of me. Scanning through quicker than I should have, I step behind the curtain into the gameplay area. I'm surrounded by a crowd of huddling ancestors. This setup is altogether different from my memories of watching hordes of sour-smelling straight boys play *Mortal Kombat* in the ripe mess of Komik Kraze, the local gaming shop in my childhood Barbados. I'm the only player here, but these ancestors assure me I'm not alone. The opening theme of *SHE KEEPS ME DAMN ALIVE* is blasting in my ears, while a line-up of characters dance on-screen. In red, flashing before me: 'SHOOT THE SCREEN TO START'. The gun is sitting beside me on a lit pedestal, like a tempting but cursed talisman that shouldn't be moved out of place. It is an invitation to power, danger, violence and death. It is a promise of consequences, and my only tool for action. Pink, yellow, white and plastic: it makes me think of bubble-gum. It will be too late before realising I've bitten off more than I can chew.

I start, and three heads appear. 'DON'T SHOOT', they shout in chorus, giving me one final disclaimer before letting me proceed:

IT IS UP TO YOU TO DECIPHER WHO TO SHOOT. YOU HAVE TO DETERMINE AND JUDGE WHO NEEDS TO BE REMOVED BY YOUR HANDS. DOING NOTHING IS NOT AN OPTION HERE. YOU'RE EXPECTED TO DO THE HARD WORK HERE. YOU ARE EXPECTED TO PUT ENERGY IN HERE. YOU ARE EXPECTED TO SHOOT PEOPLE.

Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, *SHE KEEPS ME DAMN ALIVE* (2021).
Installation view, arebyte Gallery, London
Commissioned by arebyte. Photo: Dan Weill

Lowering the gun to my side until I'm instructed to use it, I let out a heavy sigh beneath my facemask. I know I'm being recorded here via Twitch livestream cameras. I don't know if it's a good thing that my looks of terror and dread are kept secret from the live-feed. Maybe my body language betrays all my fear and hesitation. I feel self-conscious. Dysphoric, even. I know I have a personal tendency to feel like an impostor if I ever feel like I've failed my community. Your community is only *your community* insofar as you do the work of showing up for it as best you can. It doesn't matter that I'm Black and Trans here. What matters are my actions, my ability to discern and decide. Identity Politics – when they're meaningful – are less about how you appear in the world, and more about how you act in the world, who you act for, and how the world acts on you. You cannot create a character before beginning. Your character is created as defined by your actions and the actions of the world around you.

With three levels to choose from – underwater, city, dungeon – I want to go underwater as this is where I feel most at home in my body. Plunging into a swirl of blue, I'm tasked with clearing the ocean floor of pirates and evil ship remnants. On first play, I don't know what that means. I don't know what form this evil will take. I don't know what my community looks like in this world. And my not-knowing becomes harrowingly clear when I start to sweat in hesitation. Slowly gliding through the crystal blue waters, the only character I really remember reading about is the BLACK TRANS WATER SOUL; a spirit who makes breathing possible in unbreathable circumstances. I try to keep breathing, as impossible as it feels right now.

Honestly, my first run-through is such an anxious fog of memory. I was visually overstimulated and nervous as hell. The on-screen crosshairs shuddered with my unsteady, fearful hands. I remember shooting a few times, not yet noticing the score counter at the top of the screen – a moral compass if I ever needed one. I fired most often whenever I heard a villainous low-pitch laughter resonating around certain bodies. What signifies 'evil' here seems to run almost parallel to cartoon logic. My trigger-finger never stopped feeling conflicted. All my shots felt like loaded mistakes, even when I supposedly hit the 'right' target. Sometimes, I trusted my instinct. And yet, I was mostly in my head wondering what logics and prejudices were informing my judgements.

Taking a step back from myself and the first-person for a moment, the shooter in *SHE KEEPS ME DAMN ALIVE* embodies more of a hypothetical position. What I mean is that the player cannot be harmed in the same way that other characters can. The player is found somewhere between the digital crosshairs appearing on-screen and my fleshy body making decisions that can make or break a world. The consequences enforced in this game are less to do with the welfare or health-bar of the in-game player character and more to do with the moral character (and moral failings) of the real-world player themselves. In this way, as a player, I am a haunting from the real world that will make a difference in the game's world, for better or

for worse. If I hit the wrong target, I can feel the bullet shatter in my conscience. But it goes further than this. Again, it doesn't matter that I'm coming to this game as a Black Trans player. My failure brings about the same consequences if I don't put the work in. However, I do believe that the weight and meaning of these consequences hits differently, and deeper.

Then, just like that, I'm finished. A dubbed and layered voice track fades in suddenly, condemning my mindset, actions and presence: "YOU THOUGHT THIS WAS JUST A GAME [...] GET THE FUCK OUT." My breath strains. It's not my facemask. It's just me. It's my actions. I did this. I made this happen. This is the character I've created for myself. Each misfire has cut a hole in my own heart and it is here I must atone. A message appears on-screen telling me to leave immediately. Dishonouring this space, I must try and become someone else. Someone better. Someone more capable of discerning, showing up, and acting meaningfully. I put the gun down and circle back to the entrance, eager to consult the tablets of the red-robed ancestor. Where did I go wrong? What lives did I overlook when playing? What harms have I been complicit in perpetuating? The ancestors have all the information needed to lay the foundations for doing better. I spent about three hours circling back, replaying each level, reading, remembering, trying to put in the work demanded of me so as to make amends for my first transgressions against the game and its inhabitants.

This is the first time a first-person-shooter made me want to learn how to be a better player. It's not that I wanted to keep shooting. No, the feeling of shooting was honestly stomach-turning. I just wanted to do better. But what does 'better' really mean here? Is it better that I tried again? Is it better that I tried to shoot my way through to a different outcome? Or would it have been better if I just left after failing the first time? One of the 'good endings' speaks to me, contemplating:

HOW CAN I CONGRATULATE YOU ON USING A GUN TO PROTECT US? DOES THAT EVEN WORK? CAN THAT EVEN EXIST? CAN A GUN BE USED TO PROTECT BLACK TRANS PEOPLE WITHOUT BEING TURNED AROUND ON US?

Danielle Brathwaite-Shirley, *SHE KEEPS ME DAMN ALIVE* (2021). Installation view, arebyte Gallery, London
Commissioned by arebyte. Photo: Dan Weill



Yadichinma Ukoha-Kalu is a self-taught, experimental artist and illustrator based in Lagos. Her practice centres on explorations of line, form, space, and boundary which she expresses through a variety of media including painting, drawing, sculpture, film, and digital technologies.

Ukoha-Kalu was initially trained as an architect and the lasting impact of the language of spatiality resonates across her multidisciplinary works spanning sculpture, drawing, and painting. She also works with language, using words as visual elements rooted in what at first glance resembles *Nsibidi* – an ancient system of graphic communication indigenous to the Ejagham peoples of south-eastern Nigeria and southwestern Cameroon in the Cross River – but in fact, are made up of scripted forms made by the artist that extend across two and three dimensions.

Ukoha-Kalu creates unique environments across media that bring together a combination of abstract elements, textures, and materials. These sit in dialogue with each other, often repeating forms that interact as if fragmented from a source of origin or world of their own. She is interested in and has long been inspired by these processes and how they come to be, leading with a child-like wonder and curious approach to artmaking.

In the conversation that follows, Ukoha-Kalu speaks of the processual curiosity that has driven her practice as well as the act of looking to past histories and artmaking in Nigeria to think about the future.

J.D You work across different media and your art practice is research-led with a range of references, from your beginnings in architecture, to your explorations of language as a conceptual form. Could you expand on how these different disciplines come together in your work?

Y.U.K I started out as a science student and for a long time I ignored its influence on my work/approach. My process mostly begins with mapping out a concept scientifically (or formulaically, in a sense) in my head, first. Every material is treated as a new experiment, and my influences are resources. Then every new adventure becomes a theory of its own so that it becomes open for revision and testing repeatedly. Science has a way of connecting several different elements and ideas to process something new as it is not a practice that's based on abstract happenings and non-existence. I like to think that my work, though mostly abstract, is fully grounded. For someone who also has a religious background of signs and wonders, there's an attractive quality to symbolism and meaning-making. I use my art as a melting-pot for these seemingly faraway concepts, spirituality and science, as I personally think they're linked. So, in a way, if I'm constantly establishing the links between these two things, it materialises as an assemblage of a range of ideas and processes, for me making becomes limitless. I see all these aspects as essential parts of a universal whole. Text influences drawing as mark making, and drawing influences a consciousness of space where the drawing is being made, when it is made, and how.

J.D I was pleased to witness *Ásùsù*: a 24-hour drawing performance (2019) you performed at Treehouse Lagos. In this durational performance, hand-drawn symbols resembling *Nsibidi* (in my view) acted as a written score or script as you moved through spaces for the duration, covering walls and other surfaces of the project space with your drawings. You later corrected me that this wasn't at all *Nsibidi* but that it was an indirect reference. What has been your relationship to *Nsibidi* and the wider implications of lost indigenous languages, particularly those that were once written, but are now barely even traceable?

Y.U.K My fascination with language systems comes from the realisation that it is man-made, culturally constructed and fluid. I started my work with *Ásùsù* [meaning language in Igbo] because I was interested in what the internal process looked like as we thought of every mark we made. I wanted to break down the drawing/text process into its basic reason. With *Nsibidi*, I've been exposed to it for a couple of years now, loosely interacting through articles and some collaborative projects. My work with it is on a slightly different trajectory than

with *Ásùsù*. By that I mean, *Nsibidi* is a lost symbol system I'm approaching from a place of memory and archives, while *Ásùsù* I'm approaching from imagination and documentation. There's an intersection here.

J.D There's also a common thread across bodies of work that I have observed. A recurring return to texts, symbols, constructed alphabets, and abstract forms across the two and three dimensional. I thought this was so astutely explored in your solo exhibition, *Saffron in the Desert* (19 Nov to 10 Dec 2020) which, among other things, used the saffron spice as material whilst considering its trade histories. The orange colour of the spice was also used across bodies of work to express various emotional states. Could you expand on your use of materials and this relationship to drawing as an expanded field?

Y.U.K I view each body of work as a separate orbit on its own, and within that orbit, there are several smaller orbits contained. This is how we develop context, and meanings layered over each other. My approach to making manifests in a similar way as I am building from the ground up, this idea of relativity. I view different materials as tools, existing in universes of their own. I like to create environments where things of seemingly disparate contexts can share a commonality, not based on mere reason and logic, but things that are fluid such as emotion. It begins to break down these walls from one material to another, drawing out those elemental qualities to bring about a connecting thread. I think sometimes we limit our sensitivities to the immediate and obvious, but just because we find out in a lab that atoms exist and our conscious brain now plays with that idea, this does not mean we were not sensitive to that fact before. Discovery is mostly seen as grounding something in conscious reality, but we often forget that none of those things should be denied existence just because we do not acknowledge them consciously. Making these strange relationships between the materials helps concretise this part of life outside of immediate comprehension. There are endless possibilities in unlikely places, and we can also create opportunities in far more imaginative ways than we think.

J.D In your recent series, *Birthscape* (2022) which was part of *The ()ther Room* at CCA Lagos, an immersive Plexiglas installation questions ideas around definitions of the feminine. Could you expand on what feminine/femininity means to you in opposition to patriarchal societal ideals projected onto these terms?

Y.U.K I'm not sure how to answer this, as for me, the *Birthplace* installation was less an opinion and more an open question as to why certain configurations

incite femininity, and why those standards are imposed and accepted. My work with *Birthplace* was originally developed a little outside the context of femininity and I wanted to represent abstract landscapes that carried amorphous organic elements, and that's how that idea came about. As the work developed and became more exposed, more people would immediately relate it to the feminine, pointing out that the patterns and shapes were suggestive of reproductive parts and organs, which was fascinating to me as I was still struggling to define the parameters of my own femininity, or what it even meant to me. I've always felt more fluid and a little off-centre from what the general imposed standards are. I began to think that maybe in some way, I was subconsciously addressing this since it was what was being said about the work. In the context of *The ()ther Room*, I decided to let *Birthscape* breathe in those parameters specifically to properly interrogate those ideas of femininity expressed through form.

J.D You've recently spent time in Benin City looking closely at the city, no doubt the traditions of bronze casting as well as taking part in the Harmattan workshop set up by the renowned Nigerian artist, Bruce Onobrakpeya in Delta. Were there specific discoveries you were seeking or intentions you had in going to these places?

Y.U.K: I've been wanting to do more to explore my wider world beyond Lagos, which is where I have lived all my life. This year, I made an agreement with myself to throw myself out into new experiences beginning with travelling to new places and pursuing new knowledge. Benin City was particularly interesting because of the bronze casters and that history. I am currently seeking to expand my sculptural practice as I want to be able to do that by acutely interacting with practices already established here in Nigeria. I really believe that our histories hold enough material for us to build with, so that was my intention during the time I spent in Benin City. With the Harmattan workshop, this felt more like a return as I had been there four years ago and worked with soapstone for the first time. I had fallen in love with the material but hadn't gotten another chance to work with it. I took myself back to the first place I saw it and It's become part of my sculptural explorations. What was interesting to find is how close in proximity geographically these two places are, and to think about their importance to Nigerian history as they were once part of the same state, Bendel, for a short period of time. I am working towards future visits to these two places throughout the year and building research from this adventure!

DR. JAREH DAS

Nnena Kalu's Vortex Drawings

DR. JAREH DAS

Nnena Kalu, *To All The Kings Who Have No Crowns*. Photo credit: Carl Freedman Gallery, Margate, 2022

Born in Glasgow in 1966, Nnena Kalu is an artist who has worked with circular and linear motifs for over two decades resulting in both two and three-dimensional works exploring repetition, mark-making, and depth of colour. Her practice is rooted in responding to surrounding sounds and rhythms which influence her resulting shapes and forms.

Kalu is mostly non-verbal and autistic and works in a processual manner which sees her bind layers of materials together, driven instinctually to continually repeat this process, whether this in drawings, paintings, small or monumental sculptures. The resulting works all share an emphasis on materiality, mark-making, and exploration of the colour field. She continues to develop her practice at ActionSpace, a leading organisation supporting the development of artists with learning disabilities, which has been based at Studio Voltaire since 1999. In recent years, she has presented solo exhibitions at Glasgow International in 2018 with Project Ability, Humber Street Gallery, Hull in 2019 and 'elsewhere' Studio Voltaire's offsite programme in 2020, and in 2021, she was part of Yinka Shonibare's curated Royal Academy Summer Exhibition.

At the end of February, at Carl Freedman Gallery in Margate (once based in London but since 2019 now calls Margate home), I witnessed Kalu completing her outstanding large-scale vortex drawings *Untitled 1-6*, (2022) presented alongside cocoon-like sculptures that are made from strips of tape, paper, textiles, and VHS tape assembled through binding these materials together. These sculptures have been described in the text accompanying her Studio Voltaire *elsewhere* commission in central London in 2020 as 'cylinders of translucent plastic and reams of black cassette tape are unspooled in order to bind and be re-bound. In this way, each solid form is, in fact, an immense unravelled line: a winding trail given substance and volume.'

Kalu's performance was part of an outstanding group exhibition curated by Jennifer Gilbert of Jennifer Lauren Gallery entitled *To all the Kings who have no Crowns* showcasing varied artworks by non-conventional, self-taught, neurodivergent, and disabled artists redefining artmaking and its practices. Watching Nnena repeatedly draw lines, hypnotically, in a circular motion with pencil and paint pen onto large sheets of yellow paper for these works (*Untitled Vortex drawings*, 2022) gave an insight into the artist's approach to drawing. The meaning of Kalu's drawings remains unknown, with an emphasis on both the process from which shapes, forms, and colours are assembled. A performative approach of rhythmic reception to sounds around her and movements that direct artmaking means she works instinctually rather than formally. While many of Kalu's works are untitled, the word 'vortex' appears in some of their titles including *Vortex Map Drawing* (c. 2015), a drawing with overlapping pink, red, orange, white, and black circular lines on a found OS Map. A vortex is a swirling motion of water, a whirlpool. At one time, it was believed that similar shifts amongst the component parts of the universe caused rotating movement here on Earth. The form and motion at play in these drawings could be likened to a swirling motion of water, but the act of channelling compulsion into creativity and material explorations that speak of the body, performance, movement, and tactility is a more appropriate way of approaching Kalu's works.

Nnena Kalu's drawings are confident and expressive, led by her self-determination. Through a textured layering of lines by repeated action, she invites us into a world driven by sound and rhythm. An expansive, varied, and tactile practice that emerges through a desire to bring materials together layer by layer whilst continually evolving ways to keep reworking, reusing, and representing them.

Nnena Kalu, Installation view of the Summer Exhibition 2021 at the Royal Academy of Arts, London, 22 September 2021–2 January 2022. Photo: Royal Academy of Arts, London, David Parry



Nnena Kalu, *Wrapping*, Humber Street Gallery, 2019. Image courtesy of the artist and ActionSpace



Nnena Kalu working in her studio at Studio Voltaire. Image courtesy of the artist and ActionSpace, 2022



Nnena Kalu, Studio Voltaire, *elsewhere*, 2020. Commissioned by Studio Voltaire in partnership with ActionSpace, courtesy of the artist and Studio Voltaire. Image: Francis Ware



Nnena Kalu, Studio Voltaire, *elsewhere*, 2020. Commissioned by Studio Voltaire in partnership with ActionSpace, courtesy of the artist and Studio Voltaire. Image: Francis Ware



Nnena Kalu, Studio Voltaire, *elsewhere*, 2020. Commissioned by Studio Voltaire in partnership with ActionSpace, courtesy of the artist and Studio Voltaire. Image: Francis Ware

Janiva Ellis & Donald Rodney Exhibition Review



DR. JAREH DAS

Arcadia Missa, London. 5 February – 30 March 2022

A two-person exhibition at London's Arcadia Missa brings the late artist, Donald Rodney, a key figure of Britain's BLK Art Group in the 1980s, into conversation with painter, Janiva Ellis, whose expressive paintings explore abstraction, figuration, and the twisted social realities of American life. Rodney was renowned for exploring the intersections of race, social justice, black masculinity, and illness. He was born with Sickle Cell Anaemia, an inherited blood disorder in which the haemoglobin is damaged and can't carry oxygen to the tissues. Rodney brought to bear his experiences of living with this illness as a poignant metaphor in his art to comment on wider societal failures such as the racism directed at Black migrant communities in the UK extending to wider, global conversations, such as the civil rights struggle in the US and apartheid in South Africa. Ellis's paintings created twenty years later, also consider societal failures and challenge white supremacist ideologies inherent within American society today. Both artists, across time and varying contexts, show how little has changed in the fight for racial justice.

On entering the gallery, the first work encountered is Rodney's most poignant, *In the House of my Father*, 1996–97, a large-format photograph of a miniature house made from the artist's own skin placed on his palm. The structure is held together by sewing pins, that poke out of the roof and walls, indicating its fragility. Rodney made this work in ode to his father who had passed away two years prior. The photograph was taken by Andra Nelki while the artist was in Kings College Hospital, London, undergoing treatment. It was also part of a series of works he conceptualised from the hospital for his final solo exhibition *Nine Night in Eldorado* shown at South London Gallery in 1997. According to the exhibition press release, the title 'Nine Night' refers to the Jamaican event that takes place following the death of a family member, while 'Eldorado' recalls the artist's father's favourite film, evoking the mythical city of gold, whilst also being symbolic of the 'land of milk and honey' his father and other migrants from the Caribbean in the 1950s believed Britain would provide for them. Suffice to say that this wasn't and hasn't been the case for the generations of Black people who have lived here faced with racism and oppression in their everyday life, and institutionally.

Rodney was unable to be at his father's bedside due to being hospitalised himself, yet he transformed his shared hospital room into a transgressive site for continuing to make work. His room became a communal space of sorts where other friends, family, artists, and gallerists came together. In doing so, he challenged accepted codes of conduct on how patients inhabit and behave in, medical spaces. His hospital room-as-studio functioned within the framework of a regulated space (visiting hours, meal and medical intervening times were still adhered to) but, nevertheless, he was able to continue work and extend his art practice. Rodney turned to his experiences of living with sickle cell anaemia as material for his work using medical paraphernalia as material, most notably discarded X-rays. His illness also served as a metaphor for considering wider social and political issues, alongside cultural and identity formations related to his status as a second-generation British-Caribbean man growing up in 1980s England.

Rodney didn't just focus on the personal but extended his outlook to issues affecting the Black community in the UK (and beyond) as demonstrated in *Self-Portrait 'Black Men Public Enemy'*, 1990, a

Janiva Ellis & Donald Rodney,
Installation view. Photography:
Tim Bowditch Courtesy The
Artist and Arcadia Missa,
London



Janiva Ellis & Donald Rodney, Installation view. Photography: Tim Bowditch Courtesy The Artist and Arcadia Missa, London

crucifix-styled, almost two-metre-high sculpture made from lightboxes and mounted prints. The faces in this work were appropriated by Rodney from medical and media publications and addressed issues such as physical sickness as social sickness (the figure top centre and on the left like Rodney has sickle cell anaemia); police brutality (the hand-cuffed figure in what looks like blue garbs); and lastly, racism (the aggressive identikit face at the bottom from a police line-up). These images speak to a constructed representation of ‘black man’ assembled like an Egyptian cross and referencing iconographies of martyrdom and redemption.

The work draws from the writings of late cultural theorist Stuart Hall who lamented the ways the media unjustly represents the young black male as an ‘icon of danger’. Rodney’s image still resonates to this day as the work conjures feelings of being marked, wanted, and targeted by racist ideologies that both flatten and have contributed to stereotyping, the figure of the Black male as a threat to society. Rodney spoke of this work by stating: ‘I’ve been working for some time on a series... about a black male image, both in the media and black self-perception. I wanted to make a self-portrait [though] I didn’t want to produce a picture with an image of myself in it. It would be far too heroic considering the subject matter. I wanted generic black men, a group of faces that represented stereotypically black man as ‘the other’, a black man as the enemy within the body politic” (1991). This ‘othering’ of the Black male as a figure of threat with a homogenising identity has, as we know, justified police brutality, notably in the US, racist policies of stop and search in the UK, and the segregation and violence towards Black people during apartheid in South Africa. These instances are a new ‘cultural racism’ that however did not displace the racism based on biologically defined race hierarchies or the doctrine of racial typology.

Rodney’s works are interspersed with seven of Ellis’ paintings made between 2018 and 2022 including *Untitled (grey anvil)*, *Untitled (pink anvil)*, *Untitled (rat)*, all from 2019 featuring various cartoon characters serving here as warped commentaries on the slippages of disillusionment, fantasy, and horror. Ellis uses recognisable cartoon characters to explore instances of injustice or brutality directed at people of colour in the United States. Notably, the character of the duck recurs and symbolises, as per the original cartoon plot, one that is constantly being brutally hunted, episode after episode. Harmless cartoon humour, one can argue, takes a darker turn and the artist has previously stated how these ‘serve as an entry point for talking about racialized experiences of blackness, both personally and broadly.’¹ These give her layered, part abstract part figurative paintings a sardonic quality evident in her largest and most recent painting, *Incoming*, 2022, which renders a martyr-like figure resembling a statue depicted floating in the air, towering a near-apocalyptic cityscape with its back turned to avert the gaze of the viewer. The work alludes to societies in ruins with broken people.

Overall, the exhibition seeks to explore the intergenerational links which, according to the press release, is: ‘elusive as the efficacy of Black representation, which is spoken atemporally as though the last 20 years have yielded little change in the flattened approach to Black practice.’

¹ Brown, Laura, ‘Stress and Jest: A Conversation with Janiva Ellis’, <https://www.x-traonline.org/article/stress-and-jest-a-conversation-with-janiva-ellis>



Janiva Ellis, *Untitled (Grey Anvil)*, 2019. Photography: Tim Bowditch. Courtesy the Artist and Arcadia Missa, London



Janiva Ellis, *Untitled (Rat)*, 2019. Photography: Tim Bowditch. Courtesy the Artist and Arcadia Missa, London

This pairing as an intended conversation is not so convincing, as, while both artists have in common the use of real and appropriated images to present nuances of Blackness, this is never fully unpacked. There are unanswered questions of the connections between them based on their Jamaican heritage which is only stated and not explored.

It presents a flattened approach to an intergenerational reflection on concerns of social and racial justice by both artists across US-UK specific contexts and time periods. Although the individual works of both artists hold their ground through transgressive approaches in paintings and multimedia works, the conversation between both never seems to materialise as a curatorial inquiry. As historian Robin D.G. Kelley remind us, 'there are ways specific formulations of the diaspora can also keep us from seeing the full range of black transnational, political, cultural and intellectual links.'² This full range of transnational, political, cultural, and intellectual links is left unanswered and merely stated. It would have been useful to unpack how Ellis arrived at Rodney, and in turn, what Rodney's influence and legacy means for a younger generation of Black artists working today to upend oppression and white supremacy in art practices that tackle the uncomfortable head-on.

² Kelley, Robin D. G. "HOW THE WEST WAS ONE: ON THE USES AND LIMITATIONS OF DIASPORA." *The Black Scholar*, vol. 30, no. 3/4, Taylor & Francis, Ltd., 2000, pp. 31-35, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41068896>.



Janiva Ellis, *Untitled (Pink Anvil)*, 2019. Photography: Tim Bowditch. Courtesy the Artist and Arcadia Missa, London



Mac Collins, 2022, photographed by Aaron Paul Walker

Interview: JAMES DENHAM & MAC COLLINS

There's a pleasant sense of reassurance and familiarity as I wait for Mac Collins to dial into our Zoom session and begin our interview. It's a feeling of completeness and resolution, the type you get when you feel that life has come full circle. Tipped to become the next sensation in the British art and design scene, Collins has already picked up a number of high profile accolades in his short, but increasingly successful career. As the session starts, I'm welcomed by a soft-spoken 'hello', and I am instantly taken back to the happy, playful young boy I met in my care-free preschool days.

The two of us were born a year apart and lived in the same area of Nottingham in our early years, attending the same nursery, primary, and secondary school institutions. Although Collins and I gradually grew apart – as childhood friendships so often do – we were still bound by our shared lived-experiences of Nottingham's suburbia and our mirrored paths as people of dual heritage navigating the art world.

As we meet now to discuss his career, and the moments that have steered and inspired his practice, I'm reminded of the ways in which our lives have crossed, segued and intersected over the course of the last 20 years.

JAMES DENHAM **What was your earliest memory of creating?**

MAC COLLINS I was always an avid drawer. I think my sister had the academic gene, as she really loved reading, whereas I couldn't bear to look in a book and so I would often just sit and sketch. I guess creatively, the earliest memory I have is me being fully immersed in that, and having this little toolbox, like something you'd get from a B&Q, which was full of pens and pencils.

I remember going into the old Muji store in Nottingham as a kid, and somebody bought me an aluminium propelling pencil. I thought that this thing was like gold and I treasured it so much. It used to sit in the top section of that toolbox, as if it was some kind of precious jewel.

In terms of making, it's hard to pinpoint exactly, but I remember being a little bit older and going out into the garden and making things out of random bits of wood. There was never really any goal in mind, just the freedom of expressing myself, as you do when you're in that early stage of your childhood.

J.D **It's interesting that you speak about this freedom to express yourself as a child, especially when considering that you now refer to yourself as an artist, rather than a designer. Could you tell me about the significance of this transition?**

M.C I think my move to align more with conceptual art comes from the fact that that's always been the impetus behind my design work. I've always approached my projects with the goal of trying to create a narrative within which these objects would exist.

I always try to assign a meaning to everything that I create, which is ultimately the approach that you would take if you were to embark on a conceptual art project. So it felt right for me to make this distinction.

As I've gone through my career and my practice is maturing, I've started to realize more and more that the thing that really interests me is storytelling. In commercial design, you're dealing with something that has a function and a purpose, but ultimately is commodified. Whereas the stuff that I really want to work on – and that's not to say that I won't continue to have commercial designs in my practice – but where I really want to channel my energy, is in projects that allow me to be a little bit more expressive. In other words, to use the work to say something, as opposed to using the work to sell something.

In order to make commercial products you require necessity and the need for this thing that you've created to fulfil a task. If you take it from a more conceptual angle, it opens up more possibilities and considerations for how objects within a space might influence people's behaviour, and what messages or stories might be communicated through that change in behaviour.

I will always make furniture. I think furniture is really interesting; I see it as an interactive sculpture that you can engage with both visually and atmospherically through its impact on a space. But right now, I am interested in this opportunity to expand my practice to installation, sculpture, and potentially even film and performance. All these things are mediums that I've always wanted to explore, but didn't feel I had the platform, or the space, to be able to do that. Whereas now, it feels like I'm at the point of my career where I do have those things.

J.D

Using objects to express a narrative has become a signature of your work, could you explain what made you take this approach?

M.C

It's definitely not calculated. It's one of those things that I thought everybody did.

It wasn't until after I graduated, that I realised that it's not that common within the field of design. Leading with narrative seems to be something that is more pronounced in music, fashion or storytelling.

Looking back, it's something that I developed very early in my practice. I remember in my first year at university, we'd been given a brief to design a bike light. I came up with the idea of designing a light out of copper that would eventually corrode, which turned my project into this big political statement about acid rain and the environment. I've just always created works that revolve around a particular story or narrative, because this is the side of making that I find really interesting.

J.D

You've spoken before about how your work allows you to explore your dual heritage as a British-Jamaican. I wondered, was there a specific moment, or incident, that made you start thinking critically about your racial identity, and how you can incorporate this into your practice?

M.C

There was a pivotal moment when I first moved to Newcastle. After living most of my life in a city like Nottingham where everything was really diverse, it was difficult to adjust to life in Newcastle, as I was part of the minority of non-white students within the University, and within the Design department more generally.

Akala writes about this concept in his book *Natives*, where he states that being in an environment where you're the isolated minority forces you to take ownership of your identity, which leads you to double down on your heritage. I think that feeling was definitely present during my time at university, especially at a time when I was really honing my skills as a maker, and as someone that wants to tell stories through their craft.

This resulted in me focusing my dissertation around the roles and responsibilities of Black artists during the American Civil Rights Movement. In particular, the tension between Black artists who felt it was imperative to make work that directly referenced their experiences

as Black people living in an unjust society, and those Black artists who wanted to create art that gave them the freedom to express issues or feelings that didn't solely relate to their lived-experiences as second-class citizens.

I began thinking about this debate and applying it to my own practice. I soon started questioning why I was looking at European, American and Japanese inspirations for the design of objects, and completely omitting my own history and identity. It was around this time that I started undertaking the research that would eventually go on to inspire me to create the *IkIwa* chair.

J.D

Looking back now, how do you feel about *IkIwa* and the impact it has had on your career? Do you feel as though it has limited how people view you as an artist?

M.C

We've joked about it within my group of friends and designers, because it's become this thing of, 'oh not "*that*" chair again!'. I still get press requests that say: 'Hi, we're writing this piece about *IkIwa*. Could you please send us this picture of the chair?', and there'll be a picture of the blue chair from four years ago. Nowadays, I'll say no and reply back with other works that I have completed in the time since *IkIwa*, but I found it difficult to do this in the beginning.

I think there's something to do with that blue and the scale of the chair that is, accidentally, quite appealing for publications. For me though, the chair itself has a life of its own, and I seem to be past the point of understanding it as something that I've created. As if it's its own being. Don't get me wrong, it's helped me out and we've definitely got some kind of friendship, but I do see it as something separate from me now.

Moving forward, I'm excited to explore beyond it, but I do still love it, and I often refer to those forms and will continue to use certain elements from that project in my work.

Although, the funny thing is that part of me does slightly want to continue the work I started with *IkIwa*. As I often ask myself questions about how far it could go, and how many years into the future could we still be talking about this one piece of work?

J.D

What upcoming works are you looking forward to developing and/or unveiling over the next couple of months?

M.C

The project at The Harewood House Biennial is the key thing for me at the moment, because it's the first time that I'm coming from a place where I see the work as an installation. Whilst conducting research into culture of British-Caribbean communities during my residency at New Art Exchange in Nottingham, I was put in contact with the Jamaican Dominoes League. There is a community centre in the Meadows area and a pub in Hucknall called the Limekiln, where people come together to play dominoes competitively.

Basically, I've become a bit obsessed with the game of dominoes. For me, it's become almost like a symbolic link to my heritage because it's a celebration of the best things that I imagine when I think about Jamaican culture. This tied into going to Harewood House and doing some research in relation to the Cinnamon Drawing Room, which was a place where party-goers would come to drink and play the board games of the period.

I found the experience of visiting this space quite hostile, because they've preserved the space to look how it did in its glory days. But understand, for me, and for people who look like us, these days were not the glory days. You've got to understand that they're almost enjoying this space at the expense of the people that I descend from. So I wanted to bring in this story of dominoes and put it in the space to overtake and commandeer the room.

I wanted to leave the dominoes table in this space to function as an indelible mark that represents the impact the people of the Caribbean have had on British culture. I've made this big table that is stained black with four stools around it. And I've also made these sandcast aluminium dominoes. The table's design is supposed to appear heavy, like a silhouette with chunky forms, which suggests the permanence of it as an object. As if to say that you can't move this thing, it's here to stay now. Whether you wanted it or not, when you first sent out that call for the Windrush Generation, it happened and it's here. I've titled the work *Open Code*, which refers to a way of playing Jamaican Dominoes.

I've tried not to be too jarring with it, which I guess would piss off some people that are slightly more radical than me, who would say that with that opportunity, you should really go all out. But I just don't agree with that. I want to promote a positive narrative, I don't want to go into the space and talk about slavery, I don't even want to mention it. I want to go into the space and just say, for me, ideally, the way that we venerate these spaces, and the way that we see them as quintessentially British, is inaccurate, because they omit the communities of the former colonies, which I ultimately deemed to be completely intertwined with British culture and identity. I think that our collective identity as a country is informed by people from the colonies and I think that the idea of what is considered quintessentially British should include Black guys playing dominoes in the pub.

Mac Collins exhibited *Open Code* at The Harewood House Biennial as part of *Radical Acts: Why Craft Matters between 26th March–29th August 2022*, and at Primary, Nottingham between 16th September–26th November 2022.



Interview: DE'ANNE CROOKS & NATIFAH WHITE

Untitled, 2022. Image shows an experiment from DeAnne Crookes' residency entitled 'A Tale or Two', The New Art Gallery, Walsall, 2022.
Photo: Mark Hinton

De'Anne Crooks is a Birmingham-based multidisciplinary artist and educator whose work ponders the themes of intimacy, Blackness, & politicised identities.

Taking their residency, *A Tale or Two* at New Art Gallery Walsall as an example, De'Anne guides us through their reflections on the Caribbean tales and myths that they have discovered, allowing us to see how their meanings (and De'Anne's stance on them) have evolved *with* time.



Untitled, 2022. Image shows an experiment from DeAnne Crookes' residency entitled 'A Tale or Two', The New Art Gallery, Walsall, 2022. Photo: Mark Hinton

NATIFAH WHITE Where does the title *A Tale or Two* come from?

DE'ANNE CROOKS I guess the title was really just me looking at an existing tale (or two) and the prospect of me creating my own tales and seeing what they might look like. I found that tales only exist and stay alive because people live by them, so I started thinking about ways I could further unpick this idea. I was interested in depicting these tales, taking how they have been shared, and exploring them as an image, through a series of drawings and paintings to allow them to become *real* in a way. So, in some ways, *A Tale or Two* is the exploration of where tales live and asks us: 'Why do we have them?' 'How do we have them?' And 'How do they exist with us?'

N.W What themes helped build the project?

D.C *A Tale or Two* was birthed from a point in my life where I was really interested in secrets. I was also interested in how there's a lot of things we don't say, but that are communicated in a kind of 'hush hush' way, within my immediate Black community. I like to think of this as a layered way of communicating where on the surface things are happening, whilst underneath there's all this *other* stuff being said and being done. For me, this was what I was more interested in – the *other* stuff; the things *unsaid*.

After this initial train of thought, I started to talk to other people close to me about this idea and, overtime, it went from secrets being an underlying theme within my own culture

and subcultures, to the myths that are actually *within* my own culture. I became fascinated in (re)imagining myths and folklore as something not only positive, but rich. There was still this fascination with common knowledge that maybe isn't quite true. This is the journey I went on from secrets and a less joyful experience of secrets to tales, a more rich exploration of myths and superstitions maybe being common threads in *A Tale or Two*.

N.W Throughout your four-month residency, what kinds of myths and tales did you know and what did you uncover? How did this change your outlook on presenting cross-cultural and intergenerational tales and myths?

D.C I got a real mix actually! There were ones I was already able to recall, using my own memory and experience as a resource, so I started with those. I was asking what do I already know? For example, 'if you dream about a fish, it means someone's pregnant' was one that was more commonly known and that I had heard in my Nan's and Mum's home.

What I found interesting was that for my mum, she doesn't believe in them but would often recite them to me in an observational way. So, she would say: 'oh, have you heard of this one De'Anne?', and just explain them in a way where we could sort of laugh at them. For me, this was interesting, because I then had to approach this project in a way that didn't mimic the tales; I didn't want to laugh at them.

By the end of the project, I felt like I was

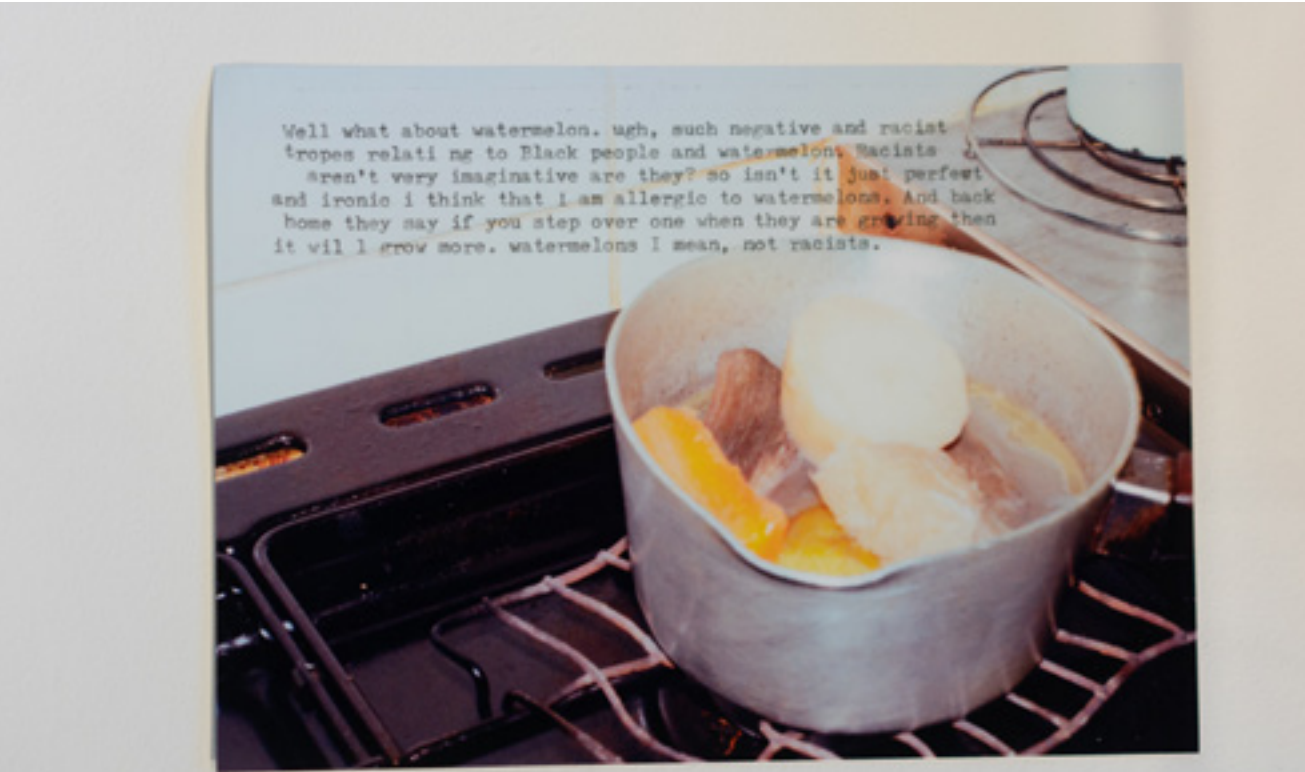
a lot more precious with the tales. I actually respected them in a way I hadn't before as I began to see them as generational wealth. So, on one level, I went on a journey from being this second generation British-Jamaican and having my mother sort of recite these tales to me in a way that was within the context of ridiculous-ness, to presenting them in a way where I was being careful with them.

Along with the ones I had from my home life, I also had different people visit the studio during the residency. I had a group of MA Arts and Education students from Birmingham City University School of Art and a collective I am a part of called the Black Hole club to share and add their tales and myths. For the collective, (who were mostly British) they added a few of their own, which even though I am British, I realised (in terms of tales) that I am a lot more Jamaican because I wasn't familiar with many of them! This was kind of affirming, to know more Jamaican tales than British ones. I felt more connected to my cultural background. There were some that I had never heard of before, such as saluting a magpie for good luck and this surprised me, because I grew up in the British public school, college, and university system but had never encountered any of these British tales before.

However, on the other hand, the MA group that visited the studio were more diverse, with students from China and Iran for example. So, some of their tales were incredibly imaginative and rich.

A few examples I wanted to share include: *Having salt in your hand will lead to you being poor.*

Untitled, 2022. Image shows an experiment from DeAnne Crookes' residency entitled 'A Tale or Two', The New Art Gallery, Walsall, 2022. Photo: Mark Hinton



If you burn chillies and tie black thread around your wrist, it will prevent the evil eye. Never pair red and white flowers together, it represents death

With these, I often saw the elements and influences of religion, magic, and witchery involved in a lot of them.

For some of the Jamaican ones, I added quite a few new ones including:

Never cut a baby boy's hair until they begin to walk and talk.

An itchy palm means you are either going to receive or lose money depending which palm is itching.

Pregnant women shouldn't step over rope as the umbilical cord will tie around the baby's throat

Avoid letting women menstruating hold a baby/newborn, it will cause the baby to have stomach ache

Missing a belt loop when putting on a belt means your partner is being unfaithful (this one is more commonly shared within the English speaking Caribbean)

A bat is a sign that a duppy is in your midst

N.W Thinking of ways tales and myths migrate/relocate, were there any that (re)routed to the body as a *landing place*?

D.C A lot of the tales I learnt were about caution, death, fear, and the policing of someone's body. In fact, a lot of them policed the female body and bodies that menstruate and carry babies including trans bodies. I often encountered tales that told you 'not to do "... with a baby or "... or 'don't do "... whilst you're pregnant' or 'when you have a baby don't do "...'.

For me, that was what was quite a significant discovery, especially because in most cases we refer to them as 'Old Wives Tales', so surely there is some connection between the namesake and the women impacted by the tales.

Speaking of impact, I wanted to share with you an example where I witnessed the livelihood of a tale whilst in Kingston. I remember seeing a young girl (15/16 y/o) follow a particular tale with such certainty and obedience. The tale went along the lines of: *'if someone is menstruating, they shouldn't hold a baby because it'll give them stomach pain'*. At the time, I was holding a baby (the girl's baby brother) and when I went to give the baby to her, she literally refused because it was *her time of the month*.

This was really interesting, because it was clear how ingrained the tale was for her and to see this tale migrate downwards through generations was surreal to be honest.

From your findings, how have these myths been passed on and who has carried them?

With the time I had with this residency and the amount of research that I did, I found that there were a lot less tales that cautioned the actions of men. I also found it ironic how the tales were called 'Old Wives Tales', but for me a lot of the tales sounded like they were made or invented by men. The reference to them being called Old Wives Tales came in regards to women being the ones to carry and share the tales.

Obviously, there is an outdated stereotype of women being prone to gossip and so some of my research appeared to take advantage of this stereotype, complicating my connection to the tales because, from my viewpoint, it was the women and wives who were carrying these tales and telling those close to them: *'oh, hey, you can't do that because ...'* or *'you can't do that because ...'*.

This was quite telling for me because here we once again see the influence the patriarchy has had on women and how they [women] are then potentially prone to project that onto other women. And this also went for some of the tales that I physically experienced too. Probably some of the tales were created by men but essentially, they were *passed on* by women. This entire residency project made me think more widely about the ways we store and embody different tales and narratives and the power that words have on things that were once considered intangible, immaterial, and abstract.

N.W Now that these tales are with you, where do you see them (and the project) going/living in the future?

D.C There is definitely a lot of breadth and depth to the project that I would like to explore. I would love to have a period of research because I think with the residency, it was a glimpse of research but essentially, the focus was on 'making' and responding.

However, if I had a period where I was just researching the *root* of these tales, and being really specific with each one, whilst also giving space to perform or digitise the tales, I think I would discover some incredible things! I also want to think more comprehensively about archiving the tales. I've been asking myself the following questions: 'How could I store or document them? Should I even do this? Is the fragility of these tales only as such because they are stored in the minds and bodies of the people?' I haven't got the answers to any of these questions yet so I guess this is also within the future of this project.

Untitled, 2022. Image shows an experiment from DeAnne Crookes' residency entitled 'A Tale or Two', The New Art Gallery, Walsall, 2022. Photo: Mark Hinton



Interview: Contemporary&

BELEMA WELLINGTON,
YVETTE MUTUMBA &
JULIA GROSSE

BELEMA WELLINGTON When did the idea of Contemporary& come to mind and how did it take shape?

YVETTE MUTUMBA Around the end of 2012, the Institute for Foreign Relations (Institut für Auslandsbeziehungen or IFA) in Berlin was interested in looking into artistic production, and contemporary art from the diaspora. So, even before C&, the IFA had a project that looked at cultural producers locally and in diaspora. Following that, they commissioned a study about the reception of contemporary art from Africa in a German context. For the IFA, C& was a logical continuation in bringing these themes together, so it was them that asked us to come up with the idea.

In the beginning, it was very clear that we had to think big and encompass not only Africa but the diaspora. We had the vision to make C& more of a global platform that not only reflects discourse happening around artistic production in diaspora, but creates new discourses. Even though it was a project being supported by a public funder, we had this uncommon creative freedom when it came to the name, the concept, and the design, with the security of receiving funding.

B.W What was very clear for you when embarking on the project that is Contemporary &?

JULIA GROSSE From the beginning, we tried our best to stay away from labelling art as 'African art'. African art is not a category that should be used. We very quickly got rid of that label.

Y.M What it does is, it homogenises and narrows down the artistic practices and production. We try to be more specific by saying that it is contemporary art from Africa, the global diaspora, and from an African perspective, as the use of that term 'African art' can be very categorising. In the beginning, we had a subtitle that was 'international art from African perspectives' which made the magazine seem like a niche interest, after a couple of years we felt like we had established what we do enough to do away with that part.

B.W How do you feel C& has changed and evolved, and how has that change affected you?

J.G The vision of C& hasn't changed, it has only become more specific as we realised the importance of such a platform, one that facilitates discourses and allows new discussions to be brought up. However, the magazine also grew to be more than a magazine, by developing into this cosmos, with the additions of our Latina magazine in 2018.

Because we are based in diaspora and represent a network focusing on visual arts in the diaspora, it's good to reflect on where we are and how we look at things. So, the idea of critical reflection is something that has developed throughout the years. Another thing we became more conscious of as C& grew was the idea of giving back, and giving advice, shifting from a place of taking advice. We admit we

don't know anything but it's interesting to see that change.

Y.M We've grown more confident and started to let go of the fear of hierarchy in the relational dynamics with institutions. Growing bolder in the way we question behaviours of institutions and coming to a place where we realise that institutions profit from you as much as you profit from them.

We've come to see the collaboration between C& and IFA and other institutions as one being at eye-level. Through the years we grew the confidence to stand tall to a degree that museums come to us worried about backlash surrounding exhibitions and things. Through growth, we have developed the confidence to question the behaviour of institutions and say no to things.

B.W At the beginning of C&, were there any statements that you were apprehensive to make for fear of losing funding or support?

J.G As Yvette said, we were able to have lots of creative freedom thanks to the IFA. We gained the ability to develop a natural editing style and never felt very intimidated... touch wood. If we had a feeling that a collaboration would compromise our values or limit our expression, we'd weigh up carefully whether to say yes and no. We favour collaborations that would allow us to work as freely as possible.

Y.M We recognise that not all people have such freedoms, especially when it comes to young, up-and-coming artists. Our response to that touches on ideas we talked about before, coming to see institutions at eye-level and realising that the institution also depends on the artist. These days, you can have the power through media, open letters, and communities to back one another and garner attention to issues that come up. It's quite understandable if young artists are in a precarious way of living. It's tricky balancing wanting a collaboration and standing firm in your beliefs, but again, you can always fall back on media and community, especially now in this zeitgeist of political 'wokeness'.

B.W While students in university, did you feel like you were being taught a perspective beyond the 'Western'?

Y.M No, definitely not. At least in the context of the time when we studied, it was not at all the case. It was strictly a Western European perspective, and we were only just starting to look at contemporary art – even that was limited to the Western world. When I did my master's, it was difficult to write about things that weren't part of the schedule of the institution.

When it came to doing my PhD, I couldn't find anyone in Germany who could supervise my topic and that led me to do my PhD in the UK as the discourse was more advanced there than it was here. A lot of issues were still going on in the UK, but it was far more advanced, making it easier for me to find a supervisor. I consciously came back to Germany to try

and change that narrative and facilitate new discussions.

J.G My case was also quite similar. I did my thesis on Kara Walker and my professor didn't even know her practice. Through the dean of the university, I had to involve an American professor who at that time was more advanced in terms of working with American theory. You couldn't find that at our art history institutes. It's different now, but 10 or 15 years ago, there was such a long way to go if you wanted to focus on discourses outside the Western canon.

B.W **How do you think institutions such as universities came to the level where they are slowly catching up with the rest of the world?**

J.G In my university, ideas like feminist perspectives and decolonial perspectives caused discourse that crept in and became more important. They began to play a bigger role in institutions and broader art history. Still, you will struggle to find people who are focused on global perspectives. There are some people who are working towards that, but you can probably count them on one hand.

B.W **Did you see appropriate representation in your faculties when you were in school? Was it easy to find people similar to you, from similar backgrounds? What do you think institutions (Universities) and students alike can do to connect more and be more diverse?**

Y.M In my art history institute, I was the only Afro-diasporic person. Even before that, when I was working at galleries, I often found myself being the only Afro-person. What I did to balance that is, I connected with different people. Try and build a network and if you can, travel to places. A big step for me was to go the extra mile in terms of reading wider sources. Doing that and going further to get in touch with people who wrote such sources and building a network and connections was and still is very helpful.

J.G I think what's interesting now is that as a student, you can look at the syllabus and point out the gaps and areas where you feel there isn't sufficient coverage, and you can bring that up to the school and request books and materials on said topics. This is something no one did back then, as no one questioned the selection of books then. I remember waiting periods of up to two weeks to get access to specific material and books and being relieved when they'd arrive. Such is not the case nowadays and that should be taken advantage of.

B.W **Both of you are now art historians. Picture yourselves, fresh out of university. Could you tell us a little bit about your frame of mind, and what you were doing?**

J.G When I graduated, I went to London to connect with other communities and write about art from my perspective and perspectives outside Germany, as in Germany you couldn't find many exhibitions focusing on artistic practices outside Western media. This is why I found myself writing articles, not only for German media,

but also for more leftist newspapers. That was an important time for me that enabled me to connect with these discourses and networks. This is how I started to make a living as an art critic and the liberating experience of being surrounded by like-minded people came in handy when I began working on Contemporary&.

Y.M For me, it was a bit different. As I worked a lot in the art field it became apparent that if I wanted to go deeper into questions around contemporary art from Africa and a global diaspora, but also concerning the German context, I needed to do a PhD. I decided to 'step out' of the work field for a while and do a PhD, which was in the UK. It was a different world to Julia's, but the outcome was similar. I did my PhD at Birkbeck which was close to other libraries and places where you could access books easily. There were also groups where it was very natural to discuss these topics. That was a crucial space and time for me to go deeper and become more knowledgeable, on an academic level. After my PhD, I started working at a museum which had a contemporary art collective, so the research and thinking that I had been doing shifted to a more practical phase.

B.W **This is the 'red issue' of the magazine, but also focuses on 'journeys'. What is one piece that you feel fits with the theme, that needs to be seen by our audience?**

Y.M With Contemporary&, we do artist editions, and our first artist edition was with Kapwani Kiwanga. Each piece was unique. I think her work is very interesting, but it was also a special moment for us because we commissioned the artwork, and she dedicated the work to us by producing something new and relevant.

B.W **What's next for the both of you?**

J.G A bigger project we're working on in the summer is one with a documenter. The idea is to produce different print issues as we produce analogue and digital works (and have been doing so since 2014). We will be partnering with four involved collectors/collectives? who are from all parts of the globe to develop four different print editions by sending our writers to the respective collectives. The idea is to tie together this concept of a constantly growing global network within C& and outside of it. It's a project we're just about to start, that's what's next!



C& Team



C& at Dak'Art, 10/5/2014
Photo: Behan Kopie

Cut & Mix Exhibition Review



JAMES DENHAM

New Art Exchange, 30 October 2021 – 8 January 2022

Centring on the emergence of the Blk Art Group (1979–1984), *Cut & Mix* uses past, present, and future understandings of the Black British experience to problematise notions of race, gender, sexuality and place in relation to Black British masculinities.

Located at Nottingham's New Art Exchange, the exhibition features seven artists, including Blk Art Group founding members, Keith Piper and Marlene Smith, who, alongside their contemporaries, spearheaded the Black British Art movement in the early 1980s. With a mixture of photography, film, installation, and drawings, *Cut & Mix* reflects the combined-aesthetic that became synonymous with the group's practice.

Antonio Roberts' *Heavyweight Champ* (2021) greets the audience as they enter the exhibition. His bold installation partitions the space with its chaotic, glitched-out imagery, tempting the viewer to decipher the haphazard, abstracted forms. Within the installation a series of monitors display re-coded video games, each with a Black character as their centrepiece.

Roberts has cleverly decontextualised Black male characters from popular fighting games and recast them in new surroundings, commenting on the (mis)representation of Blackness in mainstream video games. We see Balrog from *Street Fighter II* making an appearance inside the Mario game-verse, as well as Jax from *Mortal Kombat II* traversing through a *Donkey Kong* side-scroller. By placing the characters outside of their original context, the artist problematises stereotypical understandings of black masculinity: aggressive, athletic, and hyper-masculine. Through Roberts' use of juxtaposition, we are forced to confront both the absence of Black protagonists in video games and the ways in which Black male characters are presented within the entertainment industry more generally.

Moving into the central body of the exhibition space, the viewer is encased on all sides by a variety of works. Michael Forbes' series, *Auto Portrait after Rembrandt – a Black man in wig & baseball cap* (2018–2020), form a dominating image across one wall of the gallery space. In this series of self-portraits, Forbes poses with a deadpan expression in the centre of each image, altering only his stance, wig, and baseball cap in each photograph.

The importance of this work stems from the dialogue that is bubbling under the surface. By not smiling or gesturing, Forbes challenges stereotypical connotations of the Black male gaze. His expressionless figure transcends each image, forcing the viewer to confront the colonial legacies that continue to plague perceptions of Black masculinity. Forbes shows us that even when presented in a neutral context, Black male bodies will inherently evoke an unspoken aggression that is projected by the viewer.

The artists' decision to wear a series of brightly coloured wigs brings associations of sexuality, queerness, and drag to the work. Due to the important role that wigs and weaves have within both queer and pan-African identity politics; Forbes' use of wigs showcases the crossover between these two political ideologies of resistance. Within the context of Black masculinities, the colourful wigs represent Forbes' ability to express his agency and break free of the projected assumptions that are cast on his masculinity.

Rotimi Fani-Kayode, *Cut & Mix*, 2021, installation view, New Art Exchange. Courtesy of the artist and New Art Exchange. Photograph: Reece Straw

On the adjacent wall, television screens feature video works by Blk Art Group members, Keith Piper, *Go West Young Man* (1987), and Marlene Smith, *A (Dress) Rehearsal II* (2021), while Beverley Bennett showcases *Untitled* (2021), a work specially commissioned for the exhibition.

In the latter's piece, the artist features a group of male gospel singers performing R&B songs originally sung by female artists. Through their work, Bennett raises questions about the rigidity of Black masculinity as seen through the lens of the church; exemplified by the gospel singers' decision to change the original lyrics in order to perform the songs from a masculine-heteronormative perspective.

On the opposite wall hangs Amartey Golding's *Foxtails* (2015), which displays the medieval battle costume produced for the first film in his *Chainmail* trilogy. This handcrafted piece, which weighs over 65 kilos and took over two years to construct, was inspired by the need to protect young Black men from the effects of knife crime and gang violence.

Foxtails holds particular symbolic significance in the exhibition as not only does it offer a (im)practical solution to the wearer, but conceptually, it reflects the hyper-masculine constraints that society places on the shoulders of young Black men. Although *Foxtails* protects us from the world outside, it simultaneously inhibits our ability to express ourselves, and move freely within it.

Tucked away at the back of the exhibition, in a room painted a warm shade of terracotta, we find a series of photographs from the late Rotimi Fani-Kayode. In this quiet, dimly-lit setting, the Nigerian-born photographer's work takes on a hallowed quality.

Famous for blending motifs from his Yoruba background with baroque stylings to explore homoeroticism, myth, and identity, Fani-Kayode's pieces provide *Cut & Mix* with perhaps its finest moment.

On display are a series of multi-layered photographs that place the Black male body as their focal point. *Golden Phallus* (1989) presents us with a nude figure, whose golden-painted penis is held erect by two pieces of string. Here, Fani-Kayode challenges the sexual fetishisms and internalised myths surrounding the Black male body. By framing the full figure in silent contemplation, he creates a thinking object first, and a desired subject second, questioning the stigma that Black men are ever-erect.

Overall, *Cut & Mix* provides us with a variety of nuanced reflections on the state of Black British masculinities in the 21st Century. Curator Ian Sergeant has taken great care to ensure that the show's message is accessible, while retaining a sense of depth and intrigue, which allows each piece to shine both individually and as a collective body of work. As the title suggests, the exhibition showcases the importance of appropriation and de/recontextualisation as a political act of collage (*Cut*), and skilfully blends traditional and pop-cultural expressions to highlight typecasting and stereotyping (*Mix*). At a time when questions of race and identity have once again become the focus of public discourse, this show, and the questions it raises, are much needed.

– James Denham

James Denham is an Editor-in-Chief of ABC Magazine and a member of All Black Connect. He is the Founder of Black Friends, a race-awareness platform that aims to facilitate conversations about race and identity. James previously held the post of the Community Engagement Officer and is currently Skills Access Hub Advisor for Nottingham City Council.

Amartey Golding, *Foxtails*, 2015, installation view, New Art Exchange, Nottingham. Courtesy of the artist and New Art Exchange. Photograph: Reece Straw

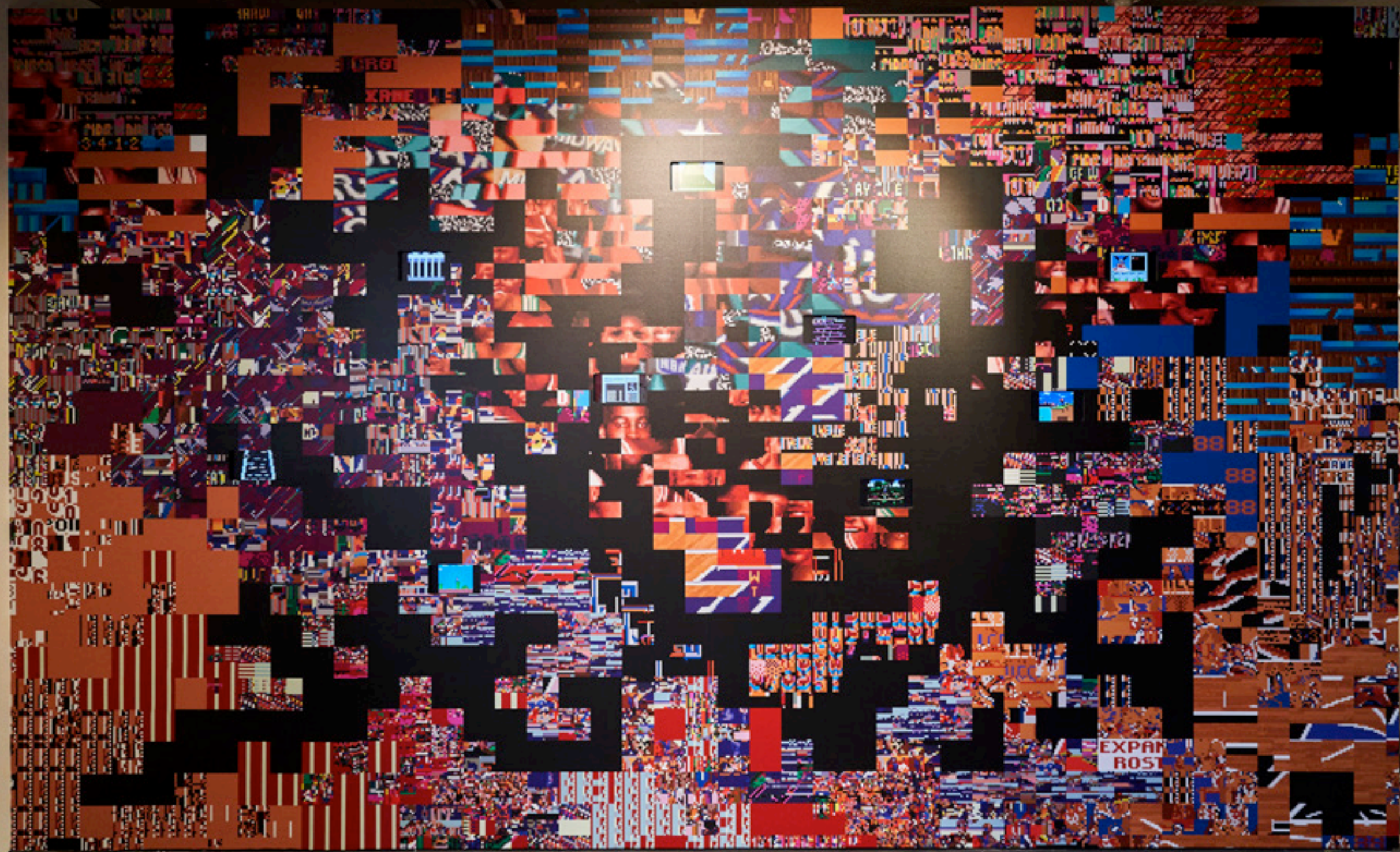




Michael Forbes, *Auto Portrait after Rembrandt, a Black Man in a Wig and Baseball Cap*, 2018–2020, installation view, New Art Exchange, Nottingham. Courtesy of the artist and New Art Exchange. Photograph: Reece Straw



Marlene Smith, *A (Dress) Rehearsal*, 2012, installation view, New Art Exchange, Nottingham. © Ajamu. Courtesy of the artist and New Art Exchange. Photograph: Reece Straw



Antonio Roberts, *Heavyweight Champ*, 2021, installation view, New Art Exchange, Nottingham.
 Courtesy of the artist and New Art Exchange. Photograph: Reece Straw



Reimagining Clay

JENNA JONES

*Body Vessel Clay: Black Women,
Ceramics & Contemporary Art*

An exhibition that explores
the reinvention of clay by eight
remarkable Black female artists
over the last 70 years.



Ladi Kwali, *Beakers*, 1962, Stoneware



Ladi Kwali, Detail

When you think of clay works, do you think of pots and vessels – or do you think of films, live art performances, and activism? These are among the many artforms that make up the *Body Vessel Clay: Black Women, Ceramics & Contemporary Art* exhibition. With more than 80 works, consisting of ceramics, preparatory drawings, films, and archival material, this experience encourages us to reimagine the use of clay.

Walking into the exhibition, we are greeted by the seminal Nigerian potter, Ladi Kwali. She is captured in a black-and-white photograph taken by Doig Simmonds in the early 1960s titled, *Ladi Kwali in front of Kiln*, and presented standing next to her celebrated water jars. Curator Dr. Jareh Das wanted to open the exhibition with a portrait of Ladi Kwali to highlight her importance. Despite her many achievements, and being on the Nigerian 20 naira note, many people do not know of Ladi Kwali due to her stark absence in art history.

Dr. Das' aim for this exhibition was to have the image of Kwali imprinted in one's memory, and for all to see the impact she has had on the discipline of ceramics. Browsing the selection of artwork, Kwali's influence on contemporary Black female artists and how they have all helped to reinvent the use of clay is clear.

First on display is a glazed water pot symbolising the artform that brought Ladi Kwali to prominence. Gwari pottery is female-led within family groups, and Ladi Kwali learned pottery at a young age from her aunt. She was taught traditional hand-building methods of coiling and pinching, and to design using traditional Gwari decorations such as geometric lines and animal motifs used in patterned bands. With her skill and talent, Ladi Kwali established herself within her own right and eventually became one of the finest traditional Gwari potters.

Magdalene Odundo, *An Orange Vessel*, 1983



Magdalene Odundo, *Esinasulo (Water Carrier)*, c.1974–76





Bisila Noha, *Reunion I, II & III*, 2021, Terracotta (left), *Dancing Goddess*, 2021, Terracotta (right)



Jade Montserrat, *Her body with no father in sight*, 2017-2021

Phoebe Collings-James,
The subtle rules the dense, 2021

‘The best I ever saw’, said British Studio Potter, Michael Cardew after seeing a collection of Ladi Kwali’s pots on display at the palace of Emir (King) Abuja Alhaji Suleiman Barau. Cardew opened the Abuja Pottery Training Centre in 1951 and invited Ladi Kwali to attend. She became the first female trainee, and created a hybrid technique, intertwining Gwari methods with Western studio pottery techniques. Here, an abundance of archival material is on display, consisting of photos, posters, newspaper articles, and letters describing Cardew and Kwali’s tours around the United States, the United Kingdom, and Europe, teaching pottery classes and demonstrating for live audiences.

In addition, a remarkable collection of lidded bowls, pots, oil jars, beer mugs, teapots, casserole dishes, vases, and much more are intentionally scattered in the middle of the room to show the vastness and range of ceramic styles created by the students of the Abuja Pottery Training Centre. For three months, renowned studio potter Dame Magdalene Odundo attended the Centre and studied traditional Gwari hand-building methods. She was taught directly by Ladi Kwali and two other female Gwari potters, Lami Toto and Asibe Ido, each teaching Odundo their own unique style. ‘My time at the pottery was to influence my trajectory and my choice to become the potter I am today’.¹

Included in the exhibition are a series of Odundo’s earlier works that are influenced by Kwali, as well as her now iconic asymmetrical, vase-like sculptural vessels. Breaking the tradition, Odundo leaves her vessels unglazed and achieves colour by applying thin layers of ‘slip’ (liquefied clay).

Upstairs, we are confronted by the beautiful neo-gothic architecture and interior design of the exhibition venue Two Temple Place. From stained-glass windows and chandeliers to statues embedded within highly decorated Corinthian columns, the venue is grand and breath-taking. Entering the upstairs exhibition space, it is apparent that the artwork begins to take on a contemporary twist. We are immediately introduced to Bisila Noha, a talented ceramicist who hand-builds two-legged vessels that pay homage to forgotten Black African female potters like Kouame Kakaha from the Republic of Côte d’Ivoire and Ladi Kwali.

Moving towards the end of the exhibition, we are introduced to five Black female artists who work with clay in radical ways. As a common theme, these creators explore the raw relationship between the human body and clay.

On the screens are two amazing short films on loop. One is a silent black-and-white work titled, *Burdened* (2018) by Julia Philips. Philips is a refreshingly unique sculptor known for creating ceramic-cast impressions of her body and assembling them with various support structures to form human bodies. With the human body being the principal subject in her work, Phillips’ controversial film conceptualises the entangled relationship between the body and the world. The 57-second video shows the torso of a feminine figure covered in black material moving both arms and legs vigorously, while stomping in the dirt. Intercuts reveal a pile of clay growing as more and more is thrown together. The film questions the relationship between the powerful and the powerless, while discussing the boundaries between race and gender, the subjected and the liberated.

At the opposite end of the space is a 9-minute film titled, *Clay* (2015). This is a collaborative performance by Jade Montserrat and Webb-Ellis conceived to expose conversations surrounding land ownership, race, trauma, and belonging. We see Jade connecting with what appears to be dug-out ground. She sits in the extracted area creating mud pies



Shawanda Corbett, *Candy Lady; Neighbourhood kid on a bicycle; Stop light; and I'll tell you what*, 2020

while covering her naked body in mud. This video represents the act of rebuilding, and the way humans at once gouge the earth and are gouged *from* the earth.

Displayed on the walls are five watercolour and pencil crayon drawings titled, *Her body with no father in sight* (2017–2021) by Jade Montserrat. As an artist and writer, Montserrat transforms her art into activism through various artforms such as painting, performance, film, sculpture, installation, print, and text to expose the vulnerabilities of humans in relation to the world.

On the floor are two pedestals, one is filled with clay vessels by Shawanda Corbett titled, *Candy Lady; Neighbourhood kid on a bicycle; Stop light; and I'll tell you what* (all 2020). Corbett is a remarkable performance and visual artist who pushes the boundaries of using the body and clay in her work. As an artist born with one arm and without legs, Corbett has developed a practice involving her own throwing technique that uses the force of the wheel to help form her work. In the exhibition, she introduces us to 'the Hood', allowing us to meet her neighbours in the form of sculptures. Each piece represents a real person through its colour and shape, and the decorations are patterns inspired by Corbett's dancing. These vessels allow us to not only connect with others but highlight individuals that are usually overlooked due to their race and class. The other floor pedestal displays the immersive *Clay installation* (2021) by Chinasa Vivian Ezungba. Ezungba, who is also a performance artist, transforms the typical purpose of clay by working with it, and against it. Her work centres around the themes of death, rebirth, depression, regeneration and degeneration, while exploring the metaphoric qualities of clay. Arranged on the wall are selected photographs from her performance, *Uro* (2018) where her body and canvas at once clash and unite with water and clay. A similar clay form that is depicted in her performance sits on the pedestal inviting the viewer's interest to feel the substantial weight of the clay (some 30kg).

At the end of the exhibition are two ceramic torsos hanging from the ceiling, hovering above a hill of black sand, as well as another torso mounted in a clear case. These three torsos are from Phoebe Collings-James' ongoing series titled, *The subtle rules the dense* (2021). Working with the flexible and malleable properties of clay, James builds casings of Roman armour plates that symbolise relics of reckless conflict and erotic desire between people. The hard armour embodies the transformation of earth to stone through fire, while traces of the artist's hands and touch imprints the surface. Focusing on non-linear storytelling and symbolic language, these forms represent the body as a container for precarious states of being – both physical and emotional.

Clay is a very common resource, known to be the oldest form of ceramic material. Prehistoric humans discovered its useful properties and used it for making pottery, but, due to the physical demands of its making, ceramics eventually transitioned into a primarily male dominated artform. However, the female artists in *Body Vessel Clay: Black Women, Ceramics & Contemporary Art* strayed away from the expected domestic and traditional methods. Applying their influences and inspiration from past Black female ceramicists, these artists create innovative vessels, captivating films, pioneering live art performances, and much more that help us to see clay in a completely new and fascinating light.

¹ Dame Magdalene Odundo, 'Foreword' to *Body Vessel Clay: Black Women, Ceramics & Contemporary Art* catalogue, (Two Temple Place: London, 2022), p. 4.



Private view, *Body Vessel Clay: Black Women, Ceramics & Contemporary Art*, Two Temple Place, London, 2022



Taya Francis by photographer Yu Fujiwara (Instagram: /8and2)

Taya Francis Interview

HANNAH KIDANE,
JADE FOSTER &
TAYA FRANCIS

Hannah Kidane and Jade Foster in conversation with artist and founder of fashion label Knit & Ting, Taya Francis

HANNAH KIDANE / JADE FOSTER **Given that your practice revolves around knitwear and fashion, do you consider yourself as a contemporary artist?**

TAYA FRANCIS Yes

H.K/J.F **What stirred your decision to start your own brand, Knit & Ting?**

T.F I was having a difficult time getting a job that I wanted in knitwear/design after studying an undergraduate degree in Fashion Textiles and Design so I decided to develop what I had started building from my graduate collection and create my brand.

H.K/J.F **Tell us about the design and cultural influences in the ‘Red Issue’ jumper?**

T.F The ‘Red Issue’ jumper is inspired by some images I had taken in Jamaica of soldiers on the back of an army pickup truck. We were driving on the highway from Negril to ‘Sav La Ma’ (Savanna la Ma) and I was drawn to their uniforms surrounded by the vibrant nature and clear blue sky. As the theme of the jumper was to reflect on journeys and my cultural heritage, I felt like this was a great place to start. Along with my initial images, I also referenced Jamaican artists such as Yellowman and Peter Tosh for their often-bold military style. I had the idea of creating a knitted camo print using the Jamaica map outline and sampled techniques such as intarsia and duplicate stitch using an olive green as the base and playing around with the map proportions, colours, and inverted shapes. When it came to choosing the typeface for ‘Red Issue’ jumper I knew that I wanted something similar to the scripted, hand painted typography still seen on shop signs. I came across a vintage Red Stripe font, and I thought it would be the perfect tongue-in-cheek nod to the infamous drink.

H.K/J.F **How did your family trip to Jamaica impact you personally, professionally, and culturally? What did you learn about Jamaican culture that is different to the existing perspectives you hold as someone of the Jamaican Diaspora?**

T.F Being my second time visiting I was really enthusiastic to be back to see family and visit new towns and cities. I had the best time relearning how to play dominoes with elders on a trip to Floyd’s Pelican Bar in Black River. When I was younger, I would play with my cousins and Grandad, so it was lovely to feel nostalgic on a floating bar in the middle of the ocean. The pace of life in Jamaica is much slower than the UK, I always feel like I’m rushing or trying to keep up, so speaking to people and listening to completely different lifestyles and perspectives to mine really made me look at my work/ life balance and if it’s truly what I want in life.

H.K/J.F **What would you say is your design process?**

T.F I like to work with a lot of imagery and usually start with primary sources – documenting/ drawing, my own images or experiences and

creating mood boards combining this material with secondary references. Sometimes I revisit past boards and develop some initial ideas further. It really helps to build a narrative within my work.

H.K/J.F **What do you think are the defining features of 1970s rude boy aesthetic?**

T.F I would describe the rude boy aesthetic as sharp, tailored, but also having a distinctive, individual style.

H.K/J.F **How do you think rude boy culture influences/ impacts contemporary British fashion and design?**

T.F I think the early re-appropriating of traditional formal dress influenced other subcultures and opened up space for a lot of crossovers in design.

H.K/J.F **What are your views on ownership of ideas/ cultures?**

T.F It can sometimes be such a fine line to tread when referencing or taking inspiration from an idea or culture, but it’s always case-by-case whether something is accepted or not.

H.K/J.F **How do you think fashion and music overlap/ influence one another?**

T.F They’re so closely interlinked – I think they both influence each other just as much. Fashion and music have such a special relationship where they bounce off each other’s creativity, visually and musically – a mirror of what our society ultimately thinks and feels.

H.K/J.F **Do you think the interpretation of the term rude boy has travelled to become stripped of real meaning?**

T.F I wouldn’t say that it has been stripped of its real meaning. We live in a different time and words travel with us and develop. I think every generation has their own experience with the meaning of the term. The original youth movement was a response to rising unemployment after Jamaica’s independence, but if I were to ask my parents, they would have a different relation to the term compared to my grandparents.

H.K/J.F **How do you think knitwear fits into this archetypal image of rude boy?**

T.F When researching what people wore and referencing images from Jamaica in the 70s and 80s, I looked closely at the style of knitwear and noticed the typical British styles that were worn. It initially made me think about Jamaica’s relationship with the UK and how highly England is generally held and appreciated.

H.K/J.F **What are your opinions on the new generation of hypebeast culture in UK youth fashion?**

T.F I think it reflects the new digital age we’re living in – if someone is constantly following trends and keeping up with their favourite brands, it says more about the way brands are really connecting to people and building their fanbase. A lot of great successful marketing ads and campaigns are being created, that I think make consumers feel part of a brand’s ‘world’.

H.K/J.F **What has been your experience with the Nottingham arts and music scene, particularly with the Black creative community?**

T.F I moved back to Nottingham recently and so far, it’s been great meeting new creatives and reconnecting with familiar faces. The creative scene feels really welcoming in Nottingham and I’m looking forward to exploring potential collaborations and getting acquainted with more Black creatives.

H.K/J.F **What were your formative experiences engaging with art and culture that inspired you to become an artist and designer?**

T.F From as young as age 10 I had an interest in fashion – I thought I wanted to be a fashion designer but had always chosen to study textiles design throughout secondary school and college as the next best option. Before deciding to study in London, I had quite a few visits to NTU to see the Knitwear graduate shows. I think seeing knitwear collections for the first time, and being so inspired flicking through all of the look books, I started to divert from what I originally thought I would go into. More than fashion design, textiles has been so interesting for me – I like that I can create my own knits/ fabric.

H.K/J.F **How do you think your experience at Middlesex University influences your designs?**

T.F We had many weekly tutorials with different tutors so there were a lot of critiques and advice given on ways to develop my work. Sometimes it felt like maybe too much input at certain times but, from that experience, I’ve taken on some of the advice that really stuck with me and really helped.

H.K/J.F **Where do you see yourself heading with your brand in the next 5–10 years?**

T.F I have so many ideas I want to try in the next few years with Knit & Ting. After curating an event with Boiler Room last year, I know having more brand collaborations is something I’m really interested in. It would be a great way to explore other avenues I have a passion for, outside of fashion and knitwear. I also see my brand being stocked with more stores that work with designers who advocate for slow fashion. Operating much more closely with stockists who understand your pace, the importance of having certain brand values and ways of working, are the kinds of relationships I want to have and work with.





Taya Francis' graduate collection 'Big Tings' photographed by Rosie Atkin (Instagram: /rosieatkin_)





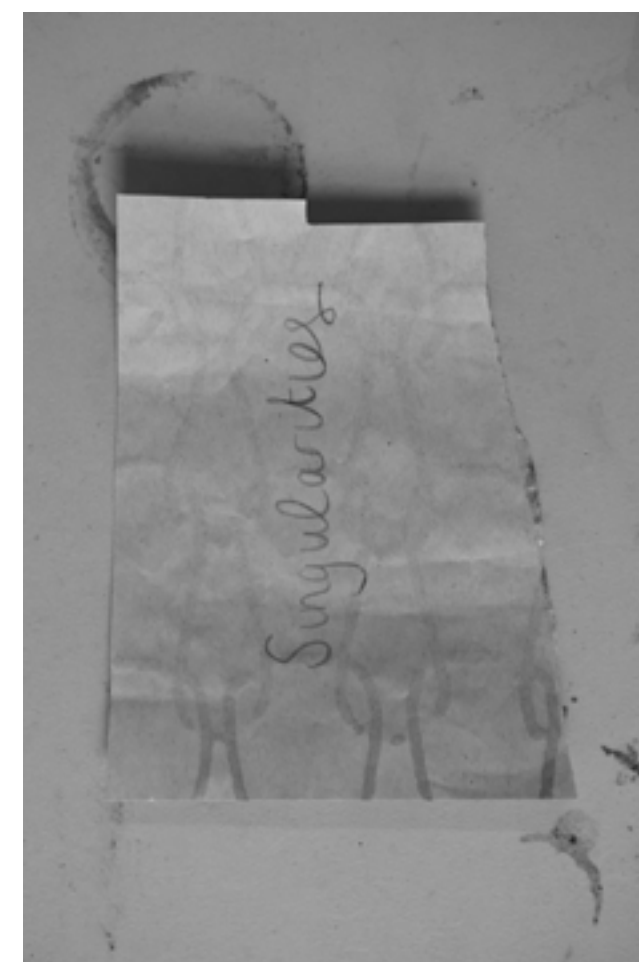
SWALI

An Invitation JAZZ SWALI

Jazz Swali is a contemporary art curator. His work with contemporary art, museums and galleries is embedded with curatorial activism, cultural and equality strategy, socio-political focuses, and alternative queer and experimental practices. This short photo essay brings into focus the ongoing relationship curators and artists develop throughout their lives and invites you into the artists' studios for a brief moment. Photographing artists and their workspaces is part of Swali's ongoing wider curatorial work, where photography is a mechanism to evolve connections, record practices and photograph artists within spaces that they inhabit to create.



Artist Aisling Ward



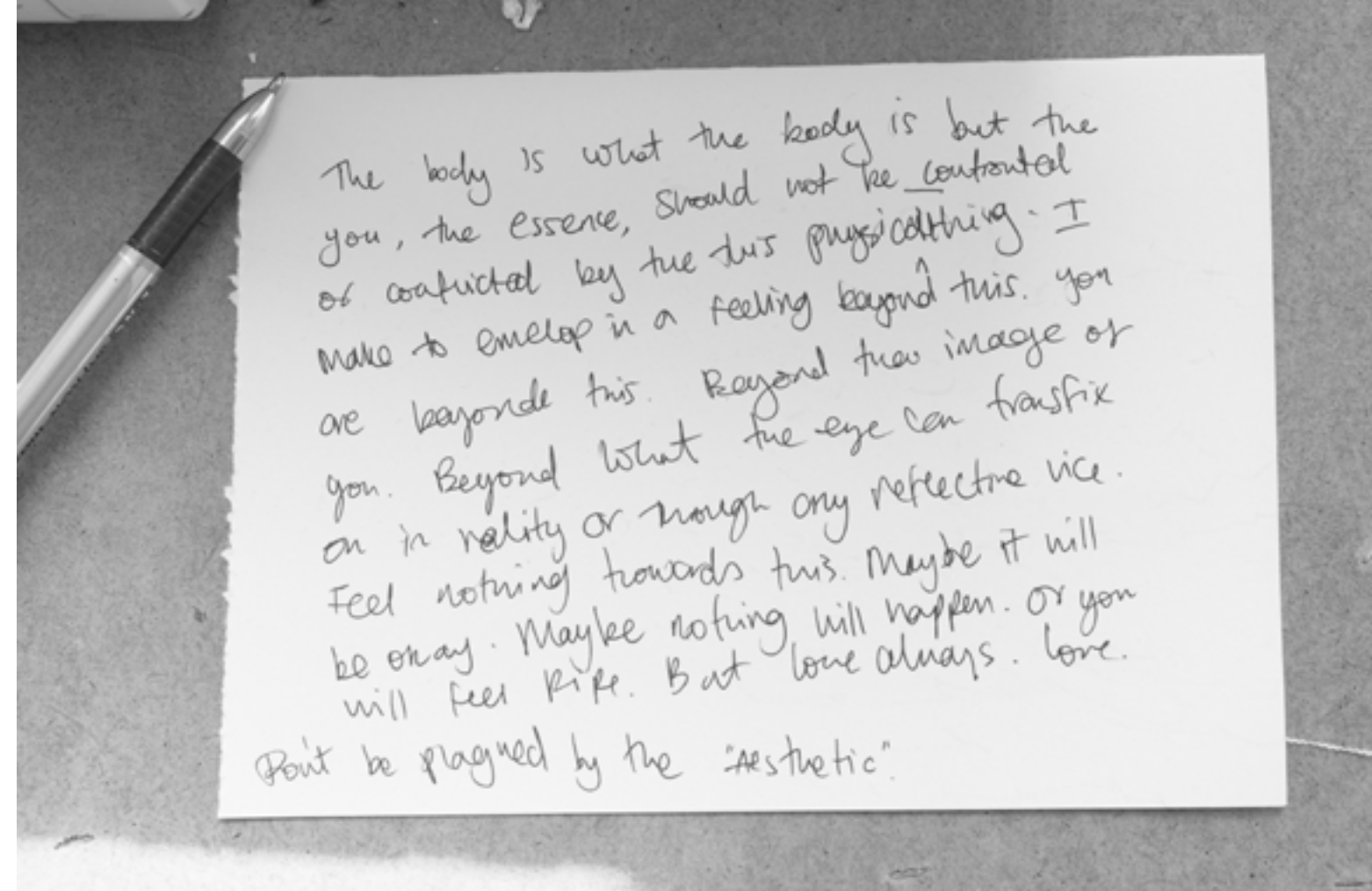


Artist Kim Thompson



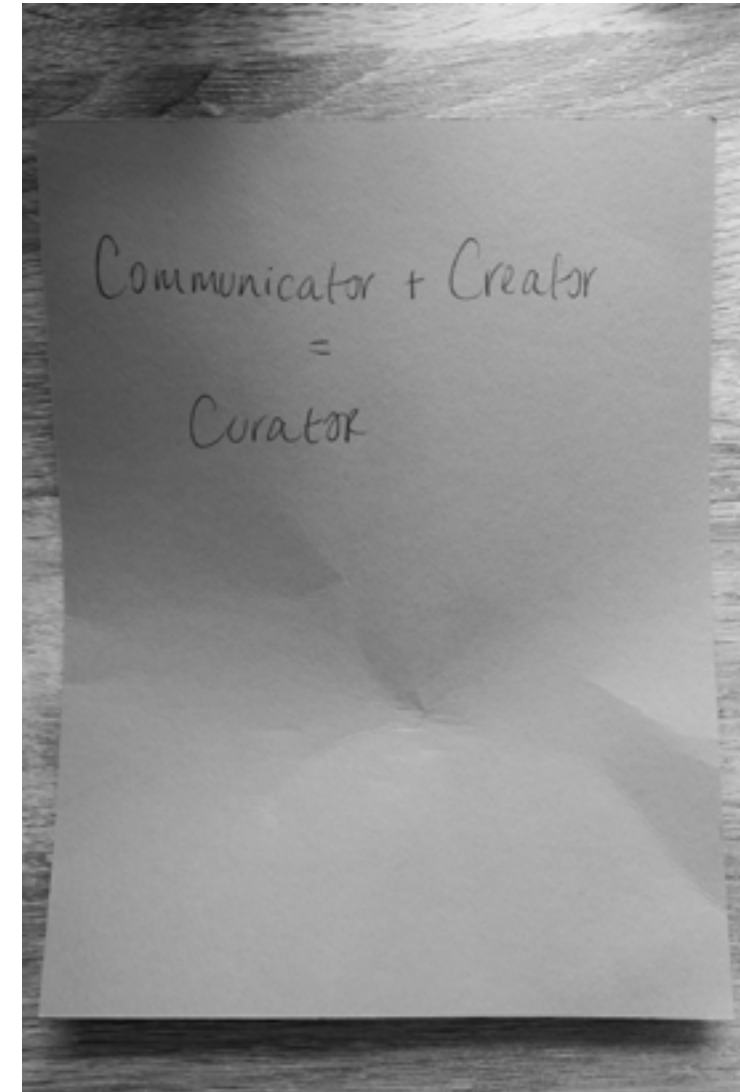


Artist Shadia Houssein





Jenna Jones, ABC



A large, thick, orange handwritten letter 'A' is positioned in the top left corner of the page. It has a slightly irregular, hand-drawn appearance with visible brush strokes.A large, thick, orange handwritten letter 'B' is positioned in the bottom left area of the page. It is drawn with a single continuous stroke, giving it a fluid, hand-drawn look.A large, thick, orange handwritten letter 'C' is positioned in the bottom center area of the page. It is drawn with a single continuous stroke, appearing as a simple, bold curve.

ABC COLLECTIVE

WE WANT OPPORTUNITIES
TO DEVELOP OUR ART, TO
EXHIBIT OUR ART, TO BE
COMPENSATED FOR OUR
ART, TO BE JUDGED AS AN
ARTIST BY THE QUALITY OF
OUR ART, AND TO BE ABLE
TO CREATE OUR ART UNDER
A MINIMUM OF FINANCIAL
AND EMOTIONAL STRESS.



'The Red Issue' Jumper by Taya Francis