

SHF X ICF_LIVING ARCHIVES: INTERGENERATIONAL CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN ARTISTS, ep2. Beverley and Marlene

Thu, Jun 22, 2023 2:27PM • 1:09:38

This transcript should not be copied, edited, repurposed, or used for any commercial purpose without the permission of the Stuart Hall Foundation. Please email info@stuarthallfoundation.org for further information.

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

film, marlene, wolverhampton, beverley, project, conversation, people, work, art, talking, stuart hall, commonwealth, artists, archive, called, exhibition, happened, sugar, wanted, shown

SPEAKERS

Jessica Taylor, Beverley Bennett, Marlene Smith

Jessica Taylor 00:11

Hello, I'm Jessica Taylor and welcome to the Living Archives series, co-produced by Stuart Hall Foundation, International Curators Forum. The Stuart Hall Foundation was established in 2015 by Professors Stuart Hall's family, friends and colleagues. It's committed to public education, addressing urgent questions of race and inequality in culture and society through talks and events, and building a growing network of Stuart Hall Foundation scholars and artists and residents. International Curators Forum offers a programme of commissions, exhibitions, projects and publications that engage with the concept of diaspora as a critical framework through which to test and explore new innovative curatorial models, and create space for artistic and discursive interventions and historical narratives and systems of representation. The Stuart Hall Foundation and International Curators Forum have come together to bring you Living Archives, a series of intimate intergenerational conversations intended to develop an alternative history of post war Britain, as told by UK-based diasporic artists working between the 1980s and the present day. The project will form what Stuart Hall calls a living archive of the diaspora, which maps the development and centrality of diasporic cultural production in Britain. This series is brought to you by funding from CoDE the Centre on the Dynamics of Ethnicity and Arts Council England.

Jessica Taylor 01:37

In Episode 2 of the living archive series, we welcome Marlene Smith and Beverly Bennett, who share with us insight into their practices in relation specifically to family, collectivity and memory.

Jessica Taylor 01:52

Welcome Marlene and, Beverly, thank you so much for joining us. For my first question, in light of our kind of relaxed joyful conversation, is I would love for you both to share with us when you first met, and if it was at a different time when you first remember encountering each other's work.

Marlene Smith 02:11

I feel like I've always known you, Beverly. That's such a strange question to ask me, 'when did we first meet?' I can't think when we first met. I feel as though I've known the Beverley for decades but I know that one of the first times was when Beverley was a student of Keith Piper's at Middlesex, and I was running a project in West Bromwich called The Public and Beverley came to be an intern. The Public was a big building project. We were building a new art centre in West Bromwich and West Bromwich was Beverley's town so I remember that. And then I remember, the first time I saw her work, was at an exhibition at Eastside Projects in Birmingham and she had a film in that project, and it was absolutely stunning. That was the first opportunity for me to see her work in real life. I'd seen stuff on her website, and I knew that she did film and that she also has a drawing practice. But when I saw the piece at Eastside that really blew me away.

Beverley Bennett 03:15

Yeah, first time I met Marlene, and I guess is the same time really at The Public. But I came across Marlene's work more in like a kind of curatorial, I want to say also editorial framework. And then later, as we've become friends, and have so many mutual friends, yeah, having an insight into her actual practice, which is so broad, and in some ways goes back to elements of my kind of drawing practice so... Marlene is this kind of formidable force, but like a quiet storm, and, you know, our friendship has, has grown significantly since. Yeah, I'm always fascinated by Marlene. And it's really nice to keep discovering more and more layers to her practice. Everyone knows Marlene is a curator and a change maker supporting so many people and still continues to do so. Yeah.

Jessica Taylor 04:16

And then is Cut & Mix at New Art Exchange in 2021, the first time that you're able to exhibit together or had you exhibited together in a show before that?

Beverley Bennett 04:24

Yeah, that was the first time and I felt so honoured to be on the same wall as Marlene and then have to also be on the same wall as Keith. Yeah, Birmingham's finest. Yeah, that was the first time it was amazing. And we got to collaborate a little bit so that made it even more special and...

Marlene Smith 04:49

well we collaborated a lot. Beverly really helped me out when I was trying to make, I was trying to make film and I don't have any background or filmmaking. And so Beverly was really generous with her time and support. So without her input, I wouldn't have been able to finish that piece. The piece was called A Dress Rehearsal and it was a just under 10-minute film of me dancing and singing in my

parent's clobber. And she came over to my flat and help me to film that so I just have to give her props for being so generous with her time and patient with me because I was in a tizz and she really helped me you and it

Beverley Bennett 05:29

You weren't in a tiz at all but there's some really beautiful serendipitous moments there. I don't want to hide any little gems, but it's such a beautiful piece. So well done Marlene. But yeah, that was the first time, first of many!

Marlene Smith 05:43

Yeah, so when, when you see me in that film, there's lots of asides, or I'm speaking to someone out of shot. And it's Beverley, nobody knows that. Well, then they know now. And you we were speaking a little bit in our little Jamaican patois. And it just, it just felt so right for the piece. And then I was really thrilled at the way that Ian installed it so that the three of us were on the same wall together. That felt right.

Jessica Taylor 06:11

And did you make that film for that exhibition? Was that a commission for that project?

Marlene Smith 06:15

It was indeed it was. I'd made a live version of it back in 2014, which Ian had been at, Ian Sergeant, who curated Cut & Mix. And originally, before we went into lockdown, the idea was that I was going to do the performance again. But then we'd locked down and all the difficulties of that, we agreed that I do a piece to camera instead. It took on a life of its own, really, and instead of trying to repeat the performance, because you know, a lot has changed, I physically changed since the 2014. I was really skinny in 2014, and fit into my parents clothes like a glove. But you know, in 2021, I put on a few pounds. It would have been impossible for me to get into the clothes, but also it just felt like a different moment. So it was good to have that time to reflect on what I'd done before and make something new, but something that is very much related to the original piece.

Jessica Taylor 07:17

And where did you present the performance in 2014.

Marlene Smith 07:21

There's a artist run space where I have my studio now and it's called A3 Projects. And it was set up by an artist and curator called Trevor Pitt. I've done several things with A3 Over the years, I did a micro residency just before doing A Dress Rehearsal. So that was really the time that I was thinking about it and developing it. So A3 is very special to my heart because they've always been supportive of me, even when what I was doing was kind of low profile, and we had no idea whether it's gonna work or not so I take three projects I presented as a curator, I did a project when I first started the Room Next to Mine. So they were the first venue that I worked with, and I did three study days. One on Amanda Holliday, one on Barbara Walker, and one on Claudette Johnson. So they hosted those, and then I did a follow up to that, where we talked about all three projects. So A3 is really important to me. And I started using the studios there about a year ago. So that's my it's my new home.

Jessica Taylor 08:27

And Beverly, were you able to see that performance in 2014? Or was the filming for the New Art Exchange exhibition the first time that you encountered the work?

Beverley Bennett 08:36

Yeah, it was the first time but I'd seen Ajamu's work so obviously with that beautiful famous photograph of Marlene. But yeah, I was in London then so.

Jessica Taylor 08:49

And can you speak a bit about the work that you showed in Cut & mixt, alongside Marlene and Keith?

Beverley Bennett 08:55

Yeah, just as Marlene had said, I was part of a group show at Eastside Projects called The Range, which was curated by Rehana Zaman. Yea really beautiful group show, very proud to have been in it. And I presented a kind of like sketch or work in progress, which is called Simon Says Dada, thankfully this year, it's coming to completion. And as Marlene said, it was a short film. And we were given the opportunity to curate an event linked with the work that you presented. So my work is funny enough, a little bit about archive and family and I really wanted my uncle who is based between New York and Jamaica to come over and sing. Because when he visited my mom, one year, he stayed at our house and I would hear him sing every morning. And his voice would just make me cry without fail. So I really wanted him to come over and maybe do a performance. That wasn't possible.

Marlene Smith 10:02

That's a beautiful memory.

Beverley Bennett 10:03

Oh yeah, I've got a recording of it. Yeah, I make him sing all the time, anyway. So yeah, that wasn't feasible. So I worked with Eastside and contacted local singers who sing in the church, Black male singers to sing songs originally sung by women within R&B. And just like Marlene, we did a couple of rehearsals. And I really wanted to think about what happens when men... The feelings that they get when they have words within their mouths that are usually uttered by women and how that response comes out. So that was a performance. And just like Marlene, with Ian's show, we were able to do a live performance. So in turn, we decided to make a short film. It's kind of like a performance and a performance in many different layers, like seeing them sing and then seeing, like rehearsals, seeing what you would normally see back of house, like cropped composition, so kind of like breaking that idea of what performance is.

Jessica Taylor 11:13

Amazing. Thank you. And then in terms of kind of future collaborations and professional engagements together, it would be great to hear a bit more about Beverley, your recent film Nation's Finest: Putting Down Roots and Birthing, which I know was a collaboration or a kind of, was that commissioned Marlene?

Marlene Smith 11:36

Yeah, it was funded by the Birmingham Commonwealth Games. So it was a commission funded by them with the also had money from Heritage Lottery funding and the Arts Council. And what happened was that they as in the Commonwealth Games, cultural committee, wanted to do a piece that somehow reflected on the history of the Black Art Movement in the region. And myself, and Ian, as part of the Black Art Group Research Project, went through a process of identifying an artist who could take that commission on. And I was delighted when Beverly put her proposal in because it was just perfect. You know, it was a way of working collaboratively working with local people in the region, but also reflecting on what evidence there is in the archival material that is available about the Black Art Group and the Black Art Movement in the region. And it turned out to be a beautiful film, I'll let Beverly tell you a bit more about it, she can talk about it much better than I can...

12:39

Yeah, so like, as Marlene said, we really wanted the commission to reflect the legacy of the Black Art Group and their significance within the West Midlands, so that consisting of obviously everyone knows about the convention in Wolverhampton. So having a group based there, the significance of Birmingham and Coventry, where Keith and Eddie had met at college. So the premise of that was to have gatherings with groups within that Afro Caribbean and African communities to meet and to talk about ideas of Commonwealth, to look at the collections in Coventry and Wolverhampton galleries with regards to the Black Art Group and Movement. So having that access, yeah, and to form these kinds of important relationships, to have that space to talk about sometimes really difficult things such as the complexities of the Commonwealth. So that took place over a couple of weeks, maybe close to a month. And within that, we would record those sessions, those conversations and that later informed the film that I then went to make with a huge team and crew who are incredible individuals allowing that vision to come to be. The film consisted of my great niece and great nephew who are gymnasts within the region so having those, you know, beautiful movements, with those small individuals flipping and jumping, and then that being juxtaposed with those conversations where people are talking about institutional racism, the difficulties of being a Black man in the UK.

Beverley Bennett 14:31

I wish I make crappy films, but I make really hard films. But they're hard films, but visually, they're the aspiration is that they are stunning. So you can have an access to that story yet. Those stories are quite hard hitting. So we created that film and then we later went on to have billboard campaigns throughout the West Midlands, which featured stills from the film itself and quotes from the groups, and they were positioned in important regional areas that are surrounded by community, so it's quite a long commission really. There's still bits that we're hoping to put out. But yeah, that's kind of like the long and short of it.

Jessica Taylor 15:16

And what was the public reaction? Like to the billboards? I mean, were you able to kind of talk to people and hear feedback and witness people encountering them for the first time?

Beverley Bennett 15:26

Um, yeah, quite a lot of friends of friends would text me and said, Oh, my gosh, I've seen this. And obviously, it was a public work, because it was shown in different arenas, but public as in not having to go into a gallery space, it really being around you and you thinking about those words or those visuals?

Jessica Taylor 15:45

And then I know there was a public programme as well, where you both were in conversation with Ian and Keith and other people as well, as part of the project. And how was that collaborative in engagement in terms of public programming? How did that all go?

Marlene Smith 15:59

That was really fun. It was at the BFI, they put together a short programme of films, which included Three Songs On Pain, Light and Time, which is a film that Trevor Matheson and Eddie George directed as part of Black Audio Film Collective back in the 90s, I believe.

Marlene Smith 16:33

So we watched all three of those films and then we watched Nation's Finest Putting Down Roots and Birthing, and then we had a Q&A discussion. So that all happened at the BFI one evening. I was really bowled over because first of all, it's sold out, so you know, there was an appetite within the London art scene to see the film and hear what Beverly in particular had to say about it. And I mean, it felt like a launch, even though the film had been made a month before. It felt like a launch event. And it really affected us all, I think, the amount of love that was coming from the audience. And it's just really heartwarming that people know your work and follow it. And sometimes it can feel a bit, you've sent stuff out into the world as an artist or curator, and you're not always sure what the response has been. That was just a nice moment to reflect on how your work is touching people. I don't know what I was expecting but I was really moved by the reception.

Beverley Bennett 17:36

Yeah, yeah, it was a really great opportunity to have, you know, those conversations with Trevor, and Claudette is obviously within the project. I worked alongside the Black Art Research Group. So we would have conversations, so it's a nice time to, I was gonna say put a full stop on but there's still little bits that needs to be done. But yeah, it was a nice time to celebrate. And then with those individuals who weren't able to go to the public events that we had in Birmingham, Wolverhampton and around the region, Coventry as well, for people to actually see the film. I must admit, I was a bit nervous about showing it to London audience, and I don't know why I think it's just because it was, it was made in Birmingham. Because yeah, as an artist, I like to show work wherever you can. And sometimes it is centred around the city, London Town specifically. So I, I like to dot around. But it was, it was really lovely just to reiterate, yeah, there was so much love in the room, and people didn't seem too depressed after watching the film. So that's good. Yeah.

Jessica Taylor 17:42

And can you speak a little bit? I think maybe Marlene, you first, kind of reflecting on the impetus for the Black Art Group Research Project, the thinking behind that, and then Beverly the opportunity to work with them and engage with that, that archive and that material and that history through the film.

Marlene Smith 19:06

Well, the impetus was really, back in 2011, I think it was, I was invited by a curator called Jason Bowman, to do a talk about the Black Art Group. By 2011, I had been out of the black art group since 1984. So it was a really, I was looking back over a long period of time of not being in the group anymore. But the context of the presentation was in a weekend programme about 'Do It Yourself' culture in the arts. So I made a presentation where I was talking about the Black Art Group and some other projects that I've done in the 80s and Keith Piper and Claudette Johnson, amongst others came to the talk. And then afterwards, we decided to go for a meal just on Brick lane. And as we were sitting reflecting on the talk that I've just done and talking about what was hot Putting in the arts. Keith looked at his phone and riots are broken out in Tottenham. So it was around the Mark Duggan incident, this talk happened. And I think that just put the icing on the cake for us because we've been talking about the history that I've been speaking about at the presentation, how could we make that history more public and how could we make it more known? And so the Black Art Group was more or less born on that same meal, we agreed that we wanted to do was to have a conference to mark the 30 years that were coming up since the 1982 conference that we did. Over the next few weeks, we formulated what would be our aims and objectives. And the real impetus was to just to make sure that that history was available to researchers and other people just to put it in a retrievable format somewhere that was public. And on the website, it says that we want to make an effort to make the history of the Black Art Movement more knowable. And since then, we've like I said, we did conference in 2012 and the keynote speaker was Kobena Mercer. Paul Goodwin was one of the co-hosts, Sonia Boyce did a paper on Eddie Chambers piece of work. So we had five or six, maybe even eight actual presentations during the day and we filmed it, and it's on the website. So the most important asset that we've produced really is the website where we have memorabilia from the Black Art Group, so things like posters, and handbills and we also have the archival material from the 2012 conference. And we have the conference papers from the 2012 conference as well. And since 2012, we've just worked very quietly, making more and more of that material available. Significant times that we've shown the archival material, we're back in 2019. I think it was when Zach Ove did his show at Somerset House. So we showed some archival material then, and when Nick Aikens was doing his project, which was started life in the Van Abbemuseum in Holland, and then became The Place is Here when it came to the UK. So we had archival presentations in both of those exhibitions. And it's just been a labour of love really just making sure that that material is available. And when we get requests for exhibitions, we exhibit it as well.

Jessica Taylor 22:37

It's an incredible resource.

Beverley Bennett 22:39

The members of the Black Art Group and research project, they're all basically friends so in terms of like, you know, having access again, it's kind of like this podcast, the Living Archives, I would give Marlene a call or stay with Trevor and Claudette and have a chat with them. Every so often I text Keith, he doesn't like to answer my text messages. So yeah, it's it's just kind of kind of like that really just having a chat. And maybe I might be nice and say a bit more about the title. So obviously, Nation's Finest is in reference to Keith Piper's work that he was commissioned for Manchester. Putting Down Roots is in reference to Marlene, when she was thinking about whether she wanted to stay in London

or go back to Midlands. Birthing is in reference to Claudette having her second child at that time. So you know, that being an homage to them. And then yeah, back to the significance of those particular vocations of where, you know, they were making work and being these pioneering artists, you know, knocking down the doors as it were. So yeah, having access to their archive them as Living Archives was quite easy. But then we did have an opportunity to go to the Herbert Museum, and art gallery in Coventry. So we got to go back of house to the stores to see those works and to pull them out. And the individuals who were having gatherings with had the opportunity to be up close and personal, and to also realise that this is a resource that you can have access to. I used to work at the National Portrait Gallery. So I understand all of those layers, I'm really interested in conservation so that was something that I wanted to bring to the project. He also did the same at Wolverhampton and we were very fortunate because the curators there also enabled us to have conversations with them and people could ask whatever questions they wanted to ask. And, again, we recorded those sessions. So yeah, I guess maybe within having access those particular locations were really great, but With the artist in the group themselves, that was quite easy, really.

Jessica Taylor 25:05

I love that reference to the artists themselves as Living Archives. One of the questions that I know Orsod has sent through for us picking up on this idea of, of the living archive is what influence Stuart Hall may have had on your work, and your engagement with some of the ideas and the practice of working with archives that we've all discussed already.

Marlene Smith 25:27

Stuart was foundational, and in even thinking about a way to approach archiving and archives, his teaching is just I don't know how best to describe the effect that his teaching and his being has on me as an artist and curator. Back in 2012, when we were trying to organise the anniversary project, I wrote to Stuart, and I sent him a long email asking him to come to the conference and do our keynote speech. And he sent me the most beautiful decline that I've ever seen. It was just really full of knowledge, really respectful, generous, but by 2012 he was very poorly by that point and he just said that he didn't think that he was strong enough to do the conference, which is why we ended up with Kobena Mercer who is a brilliant replacement. I mean, he was fantastic. I don't want to, you know, even though he was second choice, I don't want to cast any aspersions on him. He did a brilliant job. But Stuart, I think for me as well, his stewardship of inava, and autograph is really important. And I think at the time that he passed that knowledge about how rounded his support of Black artists had been, hadn't reached everyone. So I remember being at his memorial service and I think that there were there was a division between the sociology side of his audience and the art side, and it was clear that he had understood how they all linked together. And by following his footsteps, we could see those links. But Stewart was the archetypal teacher, I think that his generosity towards his students. And when I say students, I don't just mean that the official students, I mean, the way that he mentored he was a mentor to so many artists, I can remember him talking about how disappointed he was that the artists didn't read more. But there's nobody like him, really, in terms of his reach. And when he wrote to us, I was so moved by the fact that he knew the work so well. He was really paying attention to the Black Art Movement. And it seemed to be a resource for him as well, in terms of it embodying some of the practices around the living archive that he was talking about. Yeah, tremendous influence.

Beverley Bennett 27:52

I have never met you it. But in terms of his work, and legacy, what I always reference or always think about when it comes to his teachings is the idea of, when you come to a piece of work, you're bringing your own histories to it to form that kind of understanding. So I try and keep that kind of practice. When it comes to making work or working with groups of individuals, ultimately, it's all about agency, isn't it? So enabling the other people that I work with to have that agency to have that support in order to share? Yeah, so that's kind of like their biggest influence. And Trevor got a commission from the Stuart Hall Foundation. Gosh, was it last year or maybe the year before? And I was supporting Trevor with that work. So through him, I was able to also get the stories from Trevor in reference to Stuart and how he's influenced him. So yeah, it was a beautiful project to be a part of.

Jessica Taylor 28:58

And I think building on that a little bit, I mean, one of the things that just kind of talking to David A. Bailey, who is, you know, obviously, Stuart was a huge mentor for who is now very much is my mentor. One of the things that I'm always really inspired by is the cross generational conversations that were so impactful. You both have mentioned it and alluded to it the kind of the cross generational conversations and connections, both given family and then, you know, kind of found family and formed a family across your lives that have that cross generational influence. And I know, you know, appears in your work as well. You know, Marlene, you're talking about your father appearing in your work and Beverly with the cousins that are then in Nation's Finest as well. Could you both speak a bit more? I know, it's it's a large question that's kind of cross generational influence, but perhaps a bit more about the impact that has had on the work itself.

Marlene Smith 29:53

I think with my work when I look back at it now, over the years of The decades, there's always been this use of the archival and particularly the family archive, the family photographs. So they crop up at all throughout my work, certainly in the work that's most known and celebrated of mine, which I think is a piece called, well, there are two pieces. One is a piece called Art History, which is in the Sheffield Museum's collection and in that piece, there are archival photographs, four of them. And the four photographs are of Black Women Artists and their hands, and their, just references to black women as artists. And then the main part of the piece is a crocheted vase covering, which I asked my mother to make for me. And then the vase covering when it had been crocheted, she gave it to me in two pieces so there's a handle and then there's the vase itself. And she said, right, you need to stiffen them now, before you put them into the vase, and I was like, Okay, then I'll get some starch. And she was like, no, no, no, no, no, you don't stiffen them with starch. It's a sugar and water solution that you use. And so that was you know, I've been around these types of iconic house decorations all my life up until that point, and I hadn't realised that it was sugar and water. And that just opened up a whole new realm of discovery for me in terms of thinking about sugar and water. How sugar from the plantations, and the whole history of sugar in relation to my mom, and to me, you know, that legacy, that post-slavery connection.

Marlene Smith 31:40

Then the other piece that is known of mine is called Good Housekeeping. And it's the piece that I made for the ICA in 1985. And it has a family photograph in the background. And it's an image of a woman

leaning up against the wall, and the words across the top of it say my mother opens the door at 7am. She is not bulletproof. And it was really a reference to Cherry Groce. And the shooting of cherry grows. Cherry Groce is a woman who opened her door to the police early one morning, they had an a warrant, they were looking for her son, and somehow and it's never been explained how this happened. In the pursuit of her son, they managed to shoot her and she was in a wheelchair for the rest of her life. So I made that piece back in 1985. Unless you know my family, you wouldn't know this, but I did actually fashion the the image of the woman against my mom. And I have constantly in my work made reference to that generation. And I've done that because I just I want to talk about now, but you can't talk about now without knowing the history of now. And so my parents have been and as I've already talked about the peace, a dress rehearsal, my parents and their clothing and the things that they touch and use. I've always been very central to my work. And in my very latest pieces of work, I'm working with icing sugar. And again that's referenced right back to that conversation that I had with my mum about sugar and water. And you know, sugar and water is so basic, but you use it in so many different ways. Just using that material suggests a relationship between now and then between West and East between having and not having. And so that's something that is very much a part of my work.

33:36

A good while ago, when I was at college, I had aspirations to be a photographer. Wanted to do all that glitz and glam stuff like do fashion and go to runway shows. Maybe that tells you a bit about West Brom. But yes, going back to archive, you know, Families always have lots and lots of photographs back in the day when you would print out photographs. And one of my sisters would keep all of our family pictures. And I was really frustrated by that so I decided that I wanted to create my own family album. And in turn, you know, I took 35 mm pictures and medium format, did these portraits which I then made into a book called a portrait of a family. And I tried to pursue a career in photography, so talking with agencies and whatnot. And they looked at my work and they said, you know you're far too fine art.

Beverley Bennett 34:37

So I say that in terms of their wanting to know stories about individuals. I'm constantly using my family in lots of my work so my mother would be in some of my films or definitely her voice. I would interview her about why she came to the UK and that has then kind of branched out into different forms of family, otherwise known as community. So unravelling their stories. But because I'm the youngest of a number of children, the idea of intergeneration was always around my mother was significantly older than some of my friends mom's. So, you know, you have all these older, Black, Jamaican women chatting when they're going to the shops. And I loved that. I guess that's kind of like my happy place, talking with an older generation and just as Marlene said, You know, it's important to know your history, I guess what I try and attempt to do is document and archive that history. And sometimes those stories, which are really challenging to say.

Jessica Taylor 35:48

And then the ongoing kind of continuation of that work is obviously working with young people for this current film, for the recent film, and also Marlene, I know for the project that you're opening later this month, and Wolverhampton, Wolverhampton Art Gallery, they're also involving students at the school of art and across the UK in that project as well. I'm not sure if you're directly involved in that collaboration

with the students. And if that is something that, you know, kind of sits importantly for you within that project. But maybe it's a continuation of the last question is people could speak to those engagements with, with young people now.

Beverley Bennett 36:25

In some ways, I'm a bit of a big kid. But with the gatherings, I really wanted it to be intergenerational. So for the younger children or young people to hear what, yeah, to hear those stories, and to also comment on those stories, to share their insights. So that it's not just one side, it's like, you know, it's an entire circle. We're trying to form a complete narrative and hear it from all sides. The intergenerational is quite an important thing, I guess, within my practice anyway, with a project that I'm close to completing their intergenerational conversations with Black and Asian women about their fathers, and non binary individuals, forming these, again, as I say, gatherings over a significant period of time now. But forming this group, the support network, sharing their testimonies, has been like a really important thing to do. And we've made a film and I have some actors in the film. And there's a young person who will be coming to one of the public programmes, which I'm really excited about, because then in turn, she's bringing her friends along who are younger and sharing her idea about, you know, her own father, so yeah, younger generation and those intergenerational community gatherings, conversations are incredibly important. If we're looking to what we're trying to build for a future, especially within an art practice anyway, you got to keep moving forward, as well as looking back.

Marlene Smith 38:06

So the show at the Wolverhampton Art Gallery is called the more things change. And as part of the show, we and by we, I mean the Black Art Group Research Project myself, Keith and Claudia really wanted to have a link to younger generations and to have them have agency and be self directed in thinking about what the 40th anniversary of the Black Art Group's first convention should mean for them. And so we're not directly involved in it because it is autonomously organised by the young people themselves. I think our role was really just in insisting that it happened. And Silvia Theuri teaches at the Wolverhampton School of Art, and she's one of the co-curators alongside Ian Sergeant of the show. I did have some visiting lecturers at the university just recently, and I've met the young people and they were able to have access to me and ask me whatever questions they wanted to ask. And they'll be putting together an exhibition, and there'll be having some panel discussions to show what their agenda is. And I think that like with Beverley, it's really important to me that the conversation continues with the newer generation, the younger generation. Sometimes I think that there's a danger that the 80s can be fetishized a little bit, and that they might be show a little bit too much reverence to the 1980s. I'm always being told that I'm a pioneer. And I don't feel like a pioneer. I just feel like somebody who went to art college in the 1980s and was lucky enough to meet up with other like minded people. And that saved me in a way, having that community.

Beverley Bennett 39:53

Can I interject? So what do you think that's a pioneer?

Marlene Smith 39:56

Oh, I don't know, Beverly. But what all I was saying was that, you know, when we were when I was 22, I just wanted to make art. And I wanted the art to have an impact. And I wanted to say something about

being Black and British. And that was what I was thinking about, I wasn't thinking about being a pioneer, or being the first or, you know, or any of that. So I think it's important that young people have access to our stories, but also that they understand that they have agency themselves, and what's possible for them to do, I'm happy that the Black Art Group is seen as a role model. Potentially, I've done some things in our history that might be pertinent to young people now, and that they might want to do some of the same things. And certainly with this group at Wolverhampton that are coming together a call, they're calling themselves Wolverhampton Togetherness Project. What they've done is they've got in touch with students from across the country, and there's about 20 of them come together to organise the exhibition that they're having, and to put the panels together that they're going to have with the talking. So I'm just looking forward, like everybody else, looking forward to hearing what they have to say. I really enjoyed the teaching work that I did at Wolverhampton just the other week, I hope to in the future, fingers crossed touch would be able to have regular contact with young people through teaching, I think that probably would be the ideal way for me to do that.

Jessica Taylor 41:37

Well, following on from Beverley's question about what is a pioneer? Marlene, I would 100% say that you are a pioneer. And I would say that, you know the the work that you both are doing to share these questions and this history with younger generations is also pioneering and of huge importance, I can only imagine what it will mean for the students to have their show on alongside your show at Wolverhampton art gallery in generations to come when they're making their work down the line, we will see that influence 120%. So I really can't wait to visit both shows at the end of the month.

Jessica Taylor 42:13

One of the questions was how ideas around home or diaspora show up in your practice. And I know that we've touched on that already. But I also wanted to include in that the provocation that nation's finest makes Beverly around Commonwealth. I was wondering what approach you both in your conversations around the project took to that term, how you kind of grappled with it, particularly given the you know, the kind of the public outputs from the project as well, the billboards and the community engagement elements. And I mean, if you could speak to yes home, yes, diaspora, as of course, really large terms, but also more specifically in relation to that recent project, that term Commonwealth and how it might sit alongside those two.

Beverley Bennett 43:04

So I guess as part of the gatherings with the groups, we spoke about, you know, their position within the Commonwealth, themselves, and individuals coming from the Caribbean or areas of Africa, and then coming to the UK. And hopefully there will come an opportunity where those conversations will be transcribed and people will be able to have access. Some of them are quite charged, there was only a snippet that we shared within the film. But yeah, it was an interesting project. Obviously it coming to the Midlands, to Birmingham and happening throughout that region, especially the Black countries, and different groups that have made the city as it is. But you know, let's be honest, Commonwealth is a really touchy subject. There's a section in the film where someone has said something along the lines of the wealth that they have taken from those countries are built on the backs of our ancestors. It was really important to have, as I say, agency and people's truth within those statements within within that piece for people to hear and for there to be regional voices. So you know, I haven't got a voice actor to

share that. It's someone who you who might know or pass on the street. And the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham did some good things, but it also did some really challenging things. Yes, the voices were heard and we wanted to have the film in a particular setting and it didn't happen. I guess for obvious reasons. The project was near to completion at a particular time when we were hoping that it was seen but something in history happened so lots of people had to I'll be quiet for a moment. And I think what recheck could rub up against something in a very non-favourable way. But it's just that needing to have those really complicated charged difficult conversations. Maybe other artists feel this way, whenever I make a piece of work, I never really see it as being resolved. Sometimes I see it as like a work in progress even when it comes to exhibition. There's things that I want to tinker with, or there's still concerns that I have. Yeah, but at least it started a conversation. I don't know Marlene, maybe I pass the baton as it were to you...

45:36

yeah, just to touch on what you were saying earlier about diaspora and home, I think I have already talked about home as being where we grow and been nurtured. And it's an important part of who we are. And so I do make some direct and indirect references to home. I think by using certain objects from home, it kind of creates a kind of synergy between what the object is and where that place is that I'm trying to envisage. So that's why I think I use these iconic images of you know, something like the crocheted vase covering and framed photographs. They're really important symbols. I'm also hoping that my audience will be able to relate to those symbols, it's really important, this connection between me and them. But for the second part of your question about diaspora and working with different generations, the Commonwealth Games, as Beverley has already said, a lot of good things happened in Birmingham as a result of the Commonwealth Games. But the conversation about what the Commonwealth is wasn't taken up as much as we would have liked within the Commonwealth Games Festival. Our disappointment was that the film was shown at very specific times. And it wasn't shown in the auditorium. We wanted it to be shown to people that we had come to watch, I don't know, tennis, or we wanted to be shown just to a random audience like that. And just to see what their reaction was, but the powers that be told us that it was too political, did they use the word they might have used the word political, they may have used the word contentious or something like that, but they basically turned us down. And so that was very disappointing, given that the terms on which we entered into the agreement to do the work, because when we were talking to the Commonwealth Games festival organisers, we made it very clear, and they also made it very clear that there was a difficult conversation to be had about Commonwealth. And we feel that our film very much speaks to that difficult conversation. But the opportunity to share that difficult conversation was cut short. And that's, you know, as a memory of that project, it's a bit disappointing.

Beverley Bennett 47:54

Yeah, because we had some really beautiful moments like we shown it in victory square, and that was phenomenal, because it was literally just a public and people stopped and they watched and I was bowled over by that.

Marlene Smith 48:08

They stayed for the whole thing. It started to rain a little bit and the people still said they wanted to see the end of this film. I just think it was a bit of a missed opportunity to not show it within the auditorium.

Because it would have been shown to people that were watching gymnastics, I think it was, so we wanted it to be shown to the people that came out to watch live gymnastics, we wanted them to see that film in that setting and it was turned down. So that was a missed opportunity I think.

48:39

I realised I didn't answer your question Jessica about home. Pretty much like Marlene actually, within this new film, Simon Says Dada. I had some objects from my family home, like my mom's objects, and they replaced within the film, we also got some other crew members to bring objects in reference to their homes that was placed in the film, there's a section that's kind of a dining room setting, we built it in a black box space. So there are these like kind of homages to people's homes and the importance of these objects. So that was quite a lovely thing that we were able to bring to the set design of this project, this film.

Jessica Taylor 49:22

That's really great, I love that.

Jessica Taylor 49:24

Going back to the conversation around the film and presenting it to that audience was there for the games. That is a really unfortunate missed opportunity. That distinction between whether they said it was too political or too contentious... Those are very different words that, you know, they may be conflating there in terms of how we engage with political issues, and then how we also ask audiences to engage with difficult conversations. Do you have a hope for where the film might go next, recognising that you know this, this broader conversation around Commonwealth. The Games are a very small picture of how you might engage Each with Commonwealth as a construct? Do you have any hopes for where it might go next? Or how else you might continue that dialogue?

Beverley Bennett 50:09

Yeah, we'd like to get into some festivals and screenings, you know, tried a couple here in the UK haven't been fortunate as of yet, knock on wood. But yeah, I'm hoping that it's still in the works. I'm part of like a group show in the States, so I'd like to show it there. And yeah, just that kind of conversation UK, US and really having an idea of the tricky conversations that we're having here in the UK would be great to share with that particular audience. Yeah, I'd like it to be shown far and wide really. The screening that we had at BFI always warms my heart just thinking about it, the connection that the audience had granted their friends and family and people that some people that we didn't know, what they took from that film, and that experience means a great deal. So yeah, hopefully in lots of different iterations.

Marlene Smith 51:04

Yeah, same as the same as you. I just think it was unfortunate that we didn't get to have the conversation in Birmingham, where it was made. I mean, we did have a few screenings in Birmingham and Wolverhampton and Coventry so it was seen. You could see the audience's reaction, which was really it was really positive. And you're right, it is contentious and political are quite different ideas. But the main thrust of the conversation was that, but it wasn't really a conversation, it was a question and an answer. And the answer was no. And the reason given was that basically, it was too hard, too

difficult a film to be played during those leisure times. So I'd like to see that reverse. And I'd like to see the film being shown at lots of different festivals and as widely as possible, in fact, so that if there are other sporting events, where screening is available, I'd still like to see that connection being made. I think the opportunity to do that, again in Birmingham has unfortunately been missed. So it will have to be internationally.

Jessica Taylor 52:08

Yeah, it's interesting the clear recognition that the art has the capacity to expand this conversation around Commonwealth in unique and important ways, the recognition of that in you know, commissioning the work and initiating those conversations, but then the follow through to allow those conversations to happen and to trust in the audience to be able to have them

Beverley Bennett 52:30

even for like the gymnasts, I think about it'd be really interesting to even the and hear what they thought of that work, you know, representing Commonwealth nations. What can you do?

Jessica Taylor 52:42

I I wanted to pick up on our earlier conversation, Marlene, when you were speaking about the use of sugar in your work, knowing you know how important materials and certain objects are for you as well. Are there materials or objects that you would either like to revisit that perhaps you've used in the past, or have been kind of having on your mind that you'd like to use in a work at some point, but haven't had a chance to use yet.

Marlene Smith 53:07

I'm really fascinated by sugar and water at the moment, and I'm a bit fixated with it. So I've been making relief works using fondant icing. So it's the kind that you roll out. And I've been using a mangle to press crochet pieces into the fondant and then take away the crochet piece and leave the residue with the imprint. So I've been a bit fascinated by, and a bit obsessed with that. But I would also like to start making icing sugar pieces where I'm doing piping. But I haven't quite worked out what I want to pipe, which is why that hasn't happened yet. So yeah, I think there's going to be a bit of a series of different sugar works that's coming together. And I've recently been told that there's going to be an exhibition of my work at Cubit Gallery in London. So it's not happening until next year so I've got between now and then to work out what I want to do with the icing sugar. But it's a fascinating material because it doesn't last forever. A piece that I made in the 1980s called Sugar Baby All The Time. That piece doesn't exist anymore, actually. But when I last showed it, I showed it in 2012 at Sheffield. The sugar has started to go brown. So it was it had been icing sugar that I've placed on to a glass background and parts of it it turned brown and we're getting really brittle. So I'm quite fascinated in the whole lifespan of the sugar and understanding what that means for conserving work. And then material that I don't want to use again, I'm working on a remake of the piece that I made in 1985 called Good Housekeeping. And I've been working with wet plaster, and I'm just really, it's just so I just can't remember, I don't remember, when I made it the first time I don't remember it being so difficult. This plaster is all over the floor. And it's not all over the piece of work that I'm working on. So fingers crossed, I'll get it finished. Different materials and different objects, they become almost magical to me how they look and feel and smell, I mean, the sugar. In my studio, there's a smell of icing sugar, which

is quite hypnotic. And I don't know that we're going to get that in the gallery because in the gallery, they're going to be shown in glass cases. So the smell won't be there. But I'm hoping that for my solo show that will manage to find some ways to make the work work without being under glass. So yeah, some more sugar, more sugar to come.

Jessica Taylor 55:43

I'm already so excited for that show. That's incredible I'm really thrilled to hear that that that you're gonna have that solo in Cubit. That's excellent.

Jessica Taylor 55:51

Beverly, I want to direct the same question at you will see if there's any kind of objects or material that you're keen to revisit or work with for the first time.

Beverley Bennett 56:00

Oh, my gosh, I'd like to go back to doing a little bit of drawing, I haven't done any drawing in a little while. I did a few and locked down so that could be quite fun. And I want to scale them up through the large. I have enjoyed working with crew and making these short films. I really enjoy that kind of collaborative process and all these creative minds coming together and no, ultimately putting their all into what you've envisioned. And then sometimes it being remixed. I'd love to do it over a longer period of time with the Commonwealth Project, we were able to do it so quickly, it's kind of unreal. And with this one, Simon Says Dada films, ultimately making four films worth three screen installation. Again, that's been a really quick turnaround. And I just don't know how we've done it. Yeah, like I said, there's little things that could be tweaked. But we're virtually there. And yeah, we'll be launching this coming Friday. So that's rather exciting.

Jessica Taylor 57:18

That's incredible. And where will that be, so we can direct people who are listening to make sure that they don't miss it.

Beverley Bennett 57:24

So it's going to be at Grand Union in Birmingham, and then it goes to Metal in Liverpool. And hopefully that will be a three screen. And then it'll go to LUX in London. That'll be a single channel and then it will go to Newbridge in Newcastle, so they will have the three screen and store and the single channel work.

Jessica Taylor 57:47

I'm looking forward to that as well. Marlene, I want to circle back very quickly to the upcoming show in Wolverhampton. Are you showing any new work in that show? Are you showing work from the collection? What was your approach to that in dialogue with Ian and Sylvia?

Marlene Smith 58:03

So the purpose of the show really is to show some work from the 80s. But also to show how the work has progressed over the years. I don't have any of my original 80s work left to show unfortunately, the piece that's in the Sheffield collection, unfortunately was not available to show. So the only piece for me

in the in the 80s section is this remake of the 1985 piece. Good Housekeeping. So I'm worrying about whether it's going to get finished or not. But yeah, it should be fine. And then I'm showing the Dress Rehearsal film. And the portraits that Beverley made reference to. When I was doing the research for the actual performance, I did a studio shoot with Ajamu and he took some photographs of me so two of those photographs will be in the show. And what else, the film, and in the Sheffield collection, I have a piece, which is a 2019 print, but it's made from a photograph that was taken in the 1980s of a piece called do please a happy ending. And I've also got a piece from 2019, which is another crochet piece. And that one is called Time Travel. So the idea really was to have an arc of progress from 1980s Up until today. And as I mentioned, the icing sugar pieces and there have been new work that's going to be in this in this new show. So it's really some work from over the decades. And obviously there's no work from me in the 90s because I was still working very much running organisations at that time. So there's a bit of a gap between the 1985 piece, Good Housekeeping and then the next piece is not until 2011.

Jessica Taylor 59:50

But great to hear how much time that they you know, they're kind of that commitment to showing a lot of work over a good amount of time. That's wonderful to hear any plans to work on any projects together? Any dream projects you'd love to do together?

Marlene Smith 1:00:06

I would love to work with Beverly on a project that mentioned to her ages ago, actually, where I've been, I've had been having these dreams of my mother in her dressing gown. And I wanted to do a public art piece, and I just have this recurring dream. I'd like to somehow realise it. And I'd love to work with Beverley to film it.

Beverley Bennett 1:00:26

Aww that's nice. And, yeah, I'd love to work with Marlene, again, in any kind of capacity. Like, Marlene was there when we were filming Commonwealth piece that was really lovely to have her one hand. And that was my first time filming with a crew. So it's nice to have her hold my hand and be just as excited as I was. It was just absolutely lovely and I think I think now we're having like withdrawal symptoms, because we used to call each other all the time. Yeah, it's been like four weeks! What's happened!

Marlene Smith 1:01:06

Yeah, it's been really strange because we used to speak to each other on a more or less daily basis, there was so much happening with this project. And since we finished the project, or more or less finished it, there hasn't been a reason for us to be in touch as much. And so I'm having withdrawal symptoms.

Jessica Taylor 1:01:27

And Marlene, how was it working on the Portrait Project for The Guardian?

Marlene Smith 1:01:31

Oh, wow, that was so out of my comfort zone. I was really worried about it, I worried myself into the ground over that project. Because when they asked me to make the peace at first, I had all different ideas. I was working a lot in sugar at the time, and I was thinking about different ways to approach a

portrait. Because quite often in my work, there is no actual body, there is an object that stands in for the body. So I'm having all these thoughts about what I could use to signify Kath Locke. And then they came back to me and said, We want it to look like her and I was like, oh my god, what am I gonna do now. So I just started drawing, and I haven't done any drawing for such a long time. I wasn't sure of myself but as I continued with it, it felt like it was coming together. So I can't say that I enjoyed the process, I did enjoy the drawing but I was constantly worried that it wouldn't turn out. Alright. And that, you know, drawing was out of my comfort zone. The image that I was working from was such a powerful image of her inaction, she was talking and being animated. And I just wanted to capture that. But apart from that the Guardian just they came in initially to say we want to do this portrait. And then they gave us the name of the person that they wanted us to portray, then they didn't give us the biographies, actually, that were in the paper. So we had to do your own research. Luckily for me, Kath Locke had a film made about her. So I got my sense of who she was by watching her talk on camera. And she was very animated, and, you know, just got a real strong sense of who she was. And then I got a chance to speak to her son. And he sent me some photographs as well. And in all of the photographs I've seen, ever seen of Kath Locke, she's got her mouth open. So she she definitely came across to me as somebody that is really outspoken and likes to be speaking. I try to convey that in the drawing. And it turned out quite well. So I'm pleased with it.

Jessica Taylor 1:03:31

And it is a big feat representing someone. I don't know, is it hard to represent someone that you know, or someone that you didn't know?

Marlene Smith 1:03:38

Don't know, probably it's hard and representing somebody that you do know, because you know them so well. And it's hard to get what you know, out of your head and just put it on the page?

Beverley Bennett 1:03:50

Well, it's kind of like Claudette really, and it's quite funny, because, you know, oh, yeah, I guess it's public knowledge now, no? Having done the portrait of Stuart, and I'm a very lucky person, I have a little bit of privilege to have been in the studio when she was doing that and having collaborated with her sitting with some works. I think you're right, actually Marlene, maybe it's difficult knowing that person and trying to get that right, but then also discovering different elements of them or what you're willing to show. There's a work in the New York [inaudible] I hope someone buys it because I'm not sure when they see it in the UK. It's only because it was a period of time that I sat... Basically, the work looks as if someone is on the cusp of either being really infuriated or on the cusp of tears. So when it was completed, like Oh, and then Claudette is also like, oh, but that goes to show like our kind of relationship, that that relationship between that individual that you're having Have you to show that and I think you're right. It's probably someone that you know.

Jessica Taylor 1:05:05

And given how well you both know each other, that there may not be any answer to this. But is there an ever a question that you have wanted to ask each other about your practice that you haven't got the chance to ask before?

Marlene Smith 1:05:18

Actually, I wanted to ask Beverly about how she got started. But she just in the conversation, you talked about wanting to be a fashion photographer. But I just wondered before that, were you the child that was always drawing and taking photographs as a child, or how did you choose to go on your art journey?

Beverley Bennett 1:05:38

I don't think I was that child drawing all over the place and taking photographs. But there was a time when I keep thinking about it. I don't know whether I've made this up. But when I was three, I got to go to Jamaica with my mom. And, you know, meeting all the family and one of my uncle's was a photographer, and he like had his own studio. So I remember the camera, and maybe having aspirations of wanting to be a photographer then but I was always creative, whether it's like music or drama, it was always going to be linked within the arts, but I was unsure in what way. You know many artists continue to evolve, toing and froing. Like, I want to go back to drawing or want to go back to playing the clarinet.

Marlene Smith 1:06:24

You play the clarinet

Beverley Bennett 1:06:26

I used to at school. Yeah. But I'm gonna bat that question like back at you.

Marlene Smith 1:06:30

When I was 17, I did my first trip to Jamaica. I think by the time I went, I'd already decided that I wanted to do a foundation course. But I really took my steps very lightly, one step at a time, because I didn't really understand what being an artist was going to be like. And I wasn't sure if I had what it takes to be an artist. I chose the foundation course as a way to test that. It was really me thinking, oh, let me just take a tiny step and see how that feels. But my foundation courses, a wonderful experience. It was really pivotal for me and also I met the Black Art Group just on the cusp of just before I started my foundation course. I had a lot of direction, I had a lot of ambition, which was fueled by meeting the Black Art Grup. So by the time I was ready to do my degree course, I definitely knew I wanted to be an artist. But my question, and it's the same question I have now, is how I'm going to make a living? How am I going to pay the bills? So some things don't change.

Jessica Taylor 1:07:31

Are there any archives that either of you would love to engage with for future work?

Marlene Smith 1:07:36

I think I'd really like to go to Jamaica and get into the archives there, and find out a little bit more about my family. Because I only know the family history up until my my mother's grandfather. I know that generation, or something of that generation. And I don't know any deeper than that. So I'd really liked the opportunity to do one of those. Who do you think you are journies.

Jessica Taylor 1:07:59

And have you ever exhibited in Jamaica, Marlene?

Marlene Smith 1:08:02

I never have. I've never tried to but it's not come up.

Jessica Taylor 1:08:06

Because Beverly, I know you have, haven't you?

Beverley Bennett 1:08:09

I did, I exhibited in Jamaica, gosh, that's trying to remember an exhibition that was called Digital. I think it was an untitled piece where I interviewed my mom asking about how she came to the UK. And in that film I'm unpicking string vest fabric. But yeah, they also have a work called a mine in their collection. But just like Marlene, I would I'd like to go back and look at the family archive and their registers and everything and have a real deep dive.

Jessica Taylor 1:08:43

Definitely a project that should happen. Thank you both so much for that insight and for sharing all of the stories.

Marlene Smith 1:08:54

Thank you for your insightful questions. It was really easy to have a conversation with you, steering us
Thank you, Jessica,

Jessica Taylor 1:09:02

a complete joy to listen to both.

Jessica Taylor 1:09:05

Thank you all for listening to the Living Archive Series. Join us in two weeks when we host a conversation between Roshini Kempadoo and Jacob V Joyce, where they exchange ideas around Stuart Hall's work and legacy, the relationship between the archive and artistic practice and finding allies in history. Thank you and see you next time.