

# SHF X ICF\_LIVING ARCHIVES\_ INTERGENERATIONAL CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN ARTISTS, ep4. Ajamu & Bernice Mulenga

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

work, queer, people, artists, photography, stuart, archive, black, darkroom, photographers, photograph, erotic, part, conversation, practice, process, space, thinking, portraits, intimacy

## SPEAKERS

Bernice Mulenga, Ajamu, Jessica Taylor

### **Jessica Taylor** 00:11

Hello, I'm Jessica Taylor and welcome to the Living Archives series, co-produced by the Stuart Hall Foundation and the International Curators Forum. The Stuart Hall Foundation was established in 2015 by professor 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** 01:39

In episode four of the living archive series, I speak to Ajamu and Bernice Mulenga, they spend time reflecting on their respective approaches to photography, intimacy, and building spaces for future generations.

**Jessica Taylor 01:54**

So my first question is going to be, do you both remember, and if so, when was it that you first encountered each other's practices and work?

**Bernice Mulenga 02:05**

Oh, yeah, I think I do remember, I think I was a teenager and I was just like, scouring the internet and I think it was on the search for just like black queer people from London, first, and then I was looking at like, I think fine artist because I used to be interested in art when I was in school. And they never, they used to only give one black artists and I think it was like Chris Ofili that was the only one they knew. And I was like, I'm sure there's more. And I did have an interest with photography back then. But because no one was really like, helping or pushing that and already, they'll kind of push me away from fine art anyway, being like, Oh, no, your style is a bit messy. And I was like, Okay, what I'm trying to figure it out. And I kind of went off to do my own research. And then I came across, I think I came across Ingrid Pollard and through Ingrid Pollard, I found a Ajamu. And then I didn't really, like, dive deeper, because I was like, Okay, I'm trying to do other things. And then I think when I was in college, I was like, No, I'm really interested in photography. And then I used to just like, kind of just basically search the internet find people who are from the UK, because I've also felt like, they used to push a lot of just American artists. And as much as I could relate, yes, we're black. But there was just like, I'm the first in my mom's and my parent's family to be born here, raised here. So I am a black British person. And I am, you know, African, I am Congolese. And sometimes I did feel a bit of a disconnect from some of the American artists, some of the things that we'll talk about, you know, especially when it comes to like their history and family. Whereas I know a lot of my family's history. And actually, I credit a lot of the reason why I do archive and document to my mum, because she did a lot of that. And she might not see herself as an artist, but I do. And I feel like it was kind of getting lost. With my generation, I would say, and I was just kind of like, Nah, I want to kind of continue this. And then obviously, I'm also queer. So then I was like, I need to find, you know, some more people that can like kind of inspire me and just, you know, more visuals that I could see. Especially when in school, it was just like, people didn't look like me, or just stories that didn't relate to me. Because I think also, another thing, it's not just about, you know, presentation, it's about what you saying. And yeah, I was also interested in film. And I was like, one of the years when I went into college, I think they got rid of all the dark rooms. So I was really gutted. That's why I started a bit later on. But yeah, it was like maybe 16-17 when I first like discovered your work. Yeah. And then like when I was like 19-20 I was like I'm gonna dive in some more research.

**Ajamu 04:35**

I was also 16-17 when I discovered your work. Yes, I might get my timing wrong here. I photographed you as part of the Archival Sensoria, that was curated by Languid Hands at Cubitt gallery. Yeah. I think I met you before then, but I'm not sure where we met.

**Bernice Mulenga 04:58**

Yeah, I'm not sure where we met.

**Ajamu 05:00**

Yeah, I think and that's it for me. I there was a time probably about three or four years ago, I was asking a group of younger, queer, non binary photographers, who is out there? Who is with what kind of work? Yeah. And so then your name cropped up, Campbell Addy's name cropped up, Cameron Ugbodu, Alex Ikhide's name cropped up. And part of my practice is, like, I have this impossible archival project, is that I've been documenting a black, queer Britain, mainly your artists, activists, and cultural workers. So I have this long list of people that I'm like, I want to do a portrait at some point. So then I think it was about three, four, years ago, I came across your name and your work. Yeah. And then we did talk, also at the Cubitt show. Which then was a conversation with me, Bernice, and Matthew Arthur Williams from Scotland. And the conversation was more around process. Basically, for me, I kind of have a push back against ideas around visibility and representation. Yes, they're important. But then I think that the problem when we engage with the work of black queer artists, and I'm talking about photographers, especially, is that we get locked into a socio-cultural content, and the process and making is sidestepped. And then actually, I think about all those photographers who I've mentioned so far, that work with analogue and film mainly, but their darkroom work is never mentioned. So then, once again, we can then look at also Ingrid's work, the work of Lola Flash in the States, the dark room is always sidestepped, so naturally, I think that there is a resistance to talk about production, it's because maybe production is not seen as political, or I'm doing that kind of work. And so then part of my thinking, is then with a group of younger, queer, non-binary artist is to have these other kind of conversations, and then also then just after lockdown, we then had the black queer photographer salon that ran out of the studio. And that was then trying to bring practitioners, irrespective of where they are, in terms of their career and practice, to come and talk about their work and share ideas. So when Bernice had been part of that. And then recently, Bernice and I took over my LGBT photographic course, as well as before we summon. That's the kind of relationship that we have, what is really important is that there's always this dialogue I have with younger, black, queer, non-binary, trans practitioners. I think there's very few spaces where we kind of come together and just talk and laugh, and chill, built around this love for photographic practice.

**Jessica Taylor 08:09**

I read the transcript from that conversation around process that you were just mentioning, really, really loved it. And one of the things that I took away from it was this discussion of space. And so like finding space just to learn how to develop film, and just to be able to think about your practice, and your techniques, yes, could you speak a bit more about all of the work that you've done to actually create that space for other artists to come together with you

**Ajamu 08:35**

I have created that space out of just being here, I talk to other photographers, because then my house has become this unofficial queer research library. It's cause have just got banks of books from the 80s, 90s, onwards, you know, books by Stuart Hall, or whatever. Books that some of the younger black queer research have not come across around, 'I've heard about, but I've not been able to access', actually, that's the kind of space that I've created. And the space also is kind of a space that I need as well, just that there is this constant dialogue that we have. And then I think about the Fierce Project in 2013. And then those portraits then was around a group of younger, black queer artists and activists

who are the second generation of black British born. This is then where my archival practice kind of comes into the frame. So basically, I was then documenting a group of younger, black queer art and activists. This was 10 years ago. Now a lot of them are now 30 plus, yeah. The backdrop to that project is when I was a young, queer boy in Huddersfield at 18 years old, if I saw a group of portraits of black queers, what would have that I've done for me. Yeah. And then fast forward, to the Archival Sensoria and which is then mainly still a group of younger, queer artists. My thing is then the younger queers who were then now at school 17, 18, 19, younger, looking for their reflection, Archival Sensoria Orpheus might be their first point of entry. Right? Yeah, I didn't get removed from that work is because of age. And then where I'm then placed because of my practice of inaccurate. I'm trying to create this archive, because I think that the archive is not about the past, it's about the future. And that means that the archive, isn't there for those black queers yet to come, and just black queers who are not yet born. So and that's the kind of work I'm doing through a fine art practice. So then, for me, then it is still important that we still talk about, yes, the politics, but also the talk about beauty and aesthetics and creation and form. And these other things. That's part of the work. And then there was one of the reasons I love some of your work, is because your work deals with intimacy, right? Yeah, we don't see those kind of images are on a black queer network of identities. Either because you want to capture intimacy, and the work with film and Polaroid, the process is intimate as well, yeah. Because then you're touched by the process. And I feel, that's what we get a sense of, when I look at your photograph. So when actually, a lot of the work does something slightly differently. I think that there is a difference if you document just people, but then if you're documenting people that you know, are intimate with whatever shape or form, there's something that the viewer gets from that.

### **Bernice Mulenga** 11:52

I'm really happy you said that because I feel like the right people see the themes, and I feel like outside of that people just tried to pin it, Yes, this is queer photography this are queer people. But I'm like that's not the main thing. Literally, the main, my main theme is intimacy. So it's so good when it's like kind of received well, but also, yeah, you're so right. Like, the whole process is really intimate. And I feel like everything I do comes from the heart. And I feel like, if it's not coming from my heart, then why are you doing it. And it's taken me a long time as well to even be putting it out, you know, I thought about getting into film in 2015. But I only started actually actually shooting in 2016. And through the time of me making and working and taking, because you don't just take a portrait, you take it, you make it, you give it back, you know. I've been able to like grow and understand and adapt, you know, but also change. As much as this is the evergrowing archive, I'm also someone that's growing, it grows with me. So you know, sometimes people are like, Oh, this is different. I'm like, Well, I'm not the same person I was in 2016, you know, or last year, even per se you know what I mean? And, yeah, I feel like there's beauty and pain within it as well. Because I think maybe a couple years ago, people were like, Oh, it's so beautiful. You know, it's so great to maybe sometimes identify people but also not know some of the people in there. Or you know, to learn new things or like, oh, it's really like a joyful archive. And then when times have changed, and people pass away. And they're like, Wow, it's actually quite a great memory to have. But also, these are people we thought would still be with us. But also it's great to still be able to talk about these people. So it doesn't mean that yes, you know, you've gone now, but you still live on through the image. And yeah, I'm just like, I find the whole process of film, really, it's really great. It's been really difficult because I taught myself a lot of it. But I learned a lot from the mistakes I made and actually loved more than mistakes more than anything. And yeah, I feel like there's

something about working with film, going back on it as well. I've been slowly going through my archive as well, I'm re-finding images or images I didn't love but then I'm like, Oh, wow, that's really special. Or, you know, trying to understand what was I feeling back then? What was I thinking? What was I going through? And it's so interesting how that kind of really manifests through my work. I say sometimes that my photography kind of speaks for me, and it really does, actually. And I feel like it's been received really, really well, which is great. And I think because of the way I approach my work, my practice, a lot of people trust me. And I feel like you can tell that through the photography as well. You know, if I enter a space, people feel comfortable. And that feels really good to know that I've been able to build that. It is in a short amount of time, but yeah, I'm just like, I feel like this work has allowed me to really shape and mould who I am but also one aspect or small aspects of what it means to be black and queer right now in Britain. Yeah, it feels good to be part of that conversation now especially when I was like, not part of him when I was younger and kind of just, you know, I never actually planned to have been part of it. So I feel like to kind of be put into it is really nice. And I feel like the more the better. Especially because people don't see photography has an art form to invest in, people don't really respect photographers. And you know, as much as yes, I document and stuff, it doesn't mean I want to document every single thing, or I can document every single thing. So I think it's been really good in this time, and also talking about how photographers really honing in, what my core values aren't, you know, sometimes I think about when I think about therapy, they're like, what your core values? And I'm like, and then I start applying it to my work. And I'm like, yeah, what are my core values in my practice, and, you know, photography, and if it was good to be having these conversation, but also feels good to be in support of other photographers and have support from, you know, older photographers? I don't know, you know, sometimes I do think that the photography world is quite behind here, because it seems like a lot of people, like Ajamu, who are really getting their time right now. And I'm just like, that's great. But you know, I wish this was like a bit earlier on for them. And well, I don't know how you feel about that. But from what I'm seeing, it's like, great that they getting this moment, and stuff. But I'm just like, it took a really long time.

### **Ajamu 16:00**

I kind of pushed back against this moment. It's because, actually, for lots of us it's a long moment. And I think the danger is when our people see things happening, that they take notice of the artists then, but actually, the time to look out for the artist is when concrete things are not happening. Just because then the artist is not visible within that kind of spaces. Right? Yeah. It doesn't mean that they're not visible elsewhere. And I'm going to push back on something that you said, slightly, out of love. Is that you said that there was a time when you came into something and you weren't aware of it? Right? You've probably always been in that thing, but then a lot of that thing is not conscious or recognisable. Because if we aren't then attached to these things, or this means that I'm not visible here, but actually, you're in it already. And this is then around how I think about the archive. I adopted that we come into histories, we are already born in those histories. And that means that we often start from the middle, or the not from these are the kind of entry points. So I just said that with love, so then, once again, and then that way we are then begin to radically rethink the very notion of history as being linear, and then begin to unearthing the archive, as an having a different kind of a shape, or it does something else. But we kind of have to attach it to things to make sense of it. And trust is key to how some of us get our work done. Because then there's a long history around the black body into how those images have been snatched and taken from black bodies. And there's a long history of funders, organisations,

charities, researching black queer bodies to death, right, and black bodies, and then they take that knowledge, run off in all kinds of directions and the people who and then offer that knowledge, rarely benefit from that. So then what's the interest is very key. And then because then also, I think that people come closer to our work is because they watch and see. And then they appear at various points. So then, once again, we have to kind of learn sidestep this moment, it's because actually people then give the props to people who come at that moment. But then the artists have been working in all kinds of ways. And people just get caught up in this capitalist production moment. Yes, here's the print, everything is fantastic, great. But then actually, if you've got three shows happening at this particular moment, right, yeah, it might have been four or five years ago, that this moment is happening something once again, I can push back against this idea is because I don't have a grateful politic. I am not grateful for this. It's actually you've got to give the artists credit for all the work that they've done. You know, and not eating and sleeping and trying to grapple with money. And did. You don't get the props for the hard work. But that's my older head, if it was 20-30 years ago, 'yeah', 'fantastic', 'great'. Now I'm like, 'No, no, bitch, I'll be working, now give me credit for that'. So yes, it's a long moment. It's a long moment. The beauty of this moment here is in where we have a lot of these different kinds of conversation, what we are engaging with is in how queer and blackness have shifted and changed over decades. So then, once again, we need to kind of stop getting to know black and queer, but you know, what is shifting around these conversations? Because actually, for me 20 plus years ago, who was I talking to, into this country around black queer photography. So then once again, these moments is part of that is just this extension of creative space to have these other kinds of conversations. I feel like some of us black queer artists might be isolated around our thinking, it is our practice. And I think people don't always grapple with that, especially when you want to have other kinds of conversations. That's not about a paradigm of oppression and deficit or whatever. The frustrating thing is that lots of black and brown queer work is to locked into that narrative. So then, if you're the one to either talk about intimacy and process, some people go, Oh, okay. Okay, so how is that linked to homophobia or racism or whatever. So then, once again, this is why your work and Alex's work and Matthew's work is so refreshing for someone who's been around for a long time.

### **Jessica Taylor 20:50**

I think that thinking around time, and critiquing these conversations around representation, at an earlier point where this work was not being given the attention that it deserved, when I was rewatching, the short film about your practice, Homecoming, and I was listening to particularly Stuart Hall and Kobena Mercer talk about the work and reflecting on some of the language from the 1980s and 1990s, and how we would talk about this work now we would use different language. When we have institutions, mainstream institutions, at this moment, finally going back some of this photography and saying, Oh, shoot, somehow we've missed this. You know, we we've not engaged with this work. They are historicizing it. They're doing it as a look back at another time. How do we bring this very process that you're talking about? Challenging these notions of historicizing, challenging these notions of seeing the archive as past? How do we bring that into our curatorial and art history strategies for presenting and talking about this work now, so that we don't enable that kind of the language or the notions of representation that are no longer useful? How do we enact methodologies, like you're talking about now, within these institutional contexts?

### **Ajamu 22:04**

I'm not always convinced that some of those conversations can be had within an institution. And I think that we also have to bring into the conversation, mainstream black and queer institutions to our spaces, just because they also exist. So then, for me either come back to that is the artists archivist. And I've gotten to create the kind of spaces that they need to have all kinds of conversations. It's because I think that sometimes the obsession with institution is around validation. And then actually, you cannot get validation that way. If you want to, that's fantastic, great. And then my thing is a lot of the institutions, some of them collect work now because in some cases it's a fear of being called out. Simple as that. And some of them do recognise that they've ignored particular kinds of artists work. And I think, then we have to then come back to the content of the work, and then not necessarily the identity of the artists. So naturally, some of my work have now been taken up by certain institutions, because some of that work that was highly sexed, and that still is historical work. It's probably not as highly sexed 10, 20, 30 years later. So that was, again, it's the encounter with the work that's shifted, not necessarily always the ideas around the word. So when I think there's a nuanced thing happening in there, as well. And then my thing will always be, if they come to the party, they come, if they don't come, then they don't come, the artists still have to do their work, the artist still has to make work. And artists will still have to create all kinds of spaces to show work, and then have all kinds of conversations. So then once again, it really comes down to what is that the artist wants to need. So then that's one path, but there's multiple paths as well. And for me, then a lot of my early work was shown out of the country anyway. So then, once again, I will say to some of the younger black queer artists, non binary trans artists, you do not have the luxury to believe that this is the state of the art world, period. So then once again, I said this to Bernice as well, actually, how does your work sits within an international framework and context? That's the move that you have to make, just because then also, there is not really a lot of support here for black and brown queer artists. And you have the Arts Council. Questionable what they do. But then outside of that, what is there to support emerging, established, all heads, constantly, as their practice grow and change so when once again, I feel like the black queer artists don't have the luxury to think London is it. It is how does the work and ideas fit into a wider diasporic context. That's the move that has to be made. If not, you get very frustrated very quickly.

**Bernice Mulenga 25:10**

I agree. Yeah. So like I'm in that now, but I kind of have been aware of that for a while, because even early on in my work, it was actually a lot, I got a lot more love from people outside of the UK. I get love from the UK. Yes. You know, people who it's intended for, obviously people in the photos, people I interact with, or people who were just interested in art. Yeah, I do feel like my time in London is slowly coming to an end, as much as I don't want to leave. Because I do have various communities here that I'm a part of that actually, you know, if I left the London and just moved out the UK, I would actually be quite sad as much as I can always find people with stuff like that. But from like my practice point of view, yeah, I feel like my time here is really, not coming to an end, but I feel like it's time to spread my wings, and connect more in real life with the people who have been connected with me online for years, you know, and I think I've just got to take that leap of faith and just go interact or show, do, you know, and kind of just be embraced, you know? And it's quite a shame that even you're saying that, because I felt that for like, the last few years and when I've been talking to people, either photographers, they have been saying the same thing. I feel like when people here do catch up, it's going to be too late. And it's like, I don't know what the, the solution is. But also it's not my job to find the solution...

**Ajamu 26:31**

Residences, is a good way. It's because I left in 99 for a few years and I went to Holland. I went to the Jan van Eyck Academy of Maastricht for like two years. It's because I just got to a crossroads. And then what was totally frustrated with the ideas that I want to try and put forward. And so I left. And then the beauty about being away for a while, is that you get to rethink and rejig. And then I think that artists should every 10 years, throw everything up in the air and think where am I now, am I thinking about the work? Am I still excited? And then just start to rejig, just because as you grow, your thinking change, the ideas might be the same and but you've drilled further over a period of time. So then I think being away is part of the artistic process. And then because artists are also citizens of the world. For those that can leave and have the luxury, just go somewhere else, and then just rethink, meet new people, new ways to have conversations, then come back, if you want to.

**Bernice Mulenga 27:43**

Yeah, I mean, I'll always come back, you know, I get so much love here. But yeah, as of next month, I'm actually going to be travelling quite a little bit.

**Ajamu 27:50**

You ain't going nowhere, Bernice.

**Bernice Mulenga 27:52**

And, just me and my camera just for two months. I'll be you know, I'll be back and forth. But the beauty of kind of the time right now, as you know, we're so connected online. And I actually personally love my Instagram, because I've actually really built so many great connections. I've gotten so many jobs. And next month, I'm going to Belgium, and I'm gonna go for the Pride there and I'm going to do all the black Belgian queers. You know, I speak French. So it's not going to be difficult for me. And then June in Brazil, again, you know, the work I do here is not just for here, you know, and all these people relate to it, they connect with it. And it's not every single image, they connect to, it's certain parts. And I love that there's so many different themes, different ideas, different feelings, that my work creates. And I kind of want to tap into that. But also saying that I am at a different point from that work I did begin creating. Because even last year, I had my solo show. I've shown in like, you know, the Whitechapel, which is great. But you know, I grew up in that area. And it took them that long to even know that, Oh, you grew up around the corner. And the work that everyone's interested in, I've actually moved on from and people would be like I want this. So I'm like, yeah, it's not where I'm at right now, you know, and I do have to pick and choose. And I will say that it does help having people like Ajamu where I'm like, oh, yeah, you know, so I was interested in this, but I don't know how I feel about that. And he's like, Oh, that'd be good for your CV, or that would be good to have in your pocket. And then you can also just like shift and change things. You know, sometimes it's about kind of just getting into there and then doing what you want to do. Because at the end of the day, they need you more than you need them.

**Ajamu 29:31**

And I think that artists have got to learn to say no. Because then I think this constant conversation around representation means then people then come to you via your identity first. Not always the work, right? Yeah. People that pull you in all kinds of directions. Sometimes you have to just be careful that you are just being pulled to sit on panels to talk about identity because in a lot of those spaces, they



don't actually talk about the work, they talked about everything that is around the world. And I'm saying to artists, you have to learn to talk about the work. If not, you might as well become a policymaker, or a sort of scientist, but nothing wrong with policymakers or whatever. But I'm just saying, it's the work and ideas sometime, either gets sidestepped, or people that want to then take your work and ideas and to put it into something else. And then, if you then don't know how all of that works, in some cases, I've seen some artists, and by time they sit on a panel to go, Okay, I'm here it's because I'm black, queer. I can tick these four boxes one time, and what is sidestepped?

**Bernice Mulenga** 30:50

You get exhausted, though, you reach a point where you get exhausted. But also, I don't know, there's fear that comes in saying no. While I'm like there's power in saying no. And like, it's been quite quite for me this year, but I'm not upset with it. You know, I've had people message me, and I'm like, I'm not into this, or I'm resting right now. And I guess as someone who's an artist, and also freelance, sometimes people don't like that, or it's a shock, or you just think you're unavailable. It's like, No, I feel like, the more you say yes, with passion, and no with passion, the right things will align. You know, I do have some arguments that were like, Yeah, I'm tired of being on these panels. And I'm like, Well, you can say no, you don't have to say I understand maybe money and that. But also, some of these panels don't even offer you that much. And what you're talking about goes deep and beyond that cheque. And then by the end of it, you're exhausted. And honestly, that's not what you want to feel after a panel. When I go to the panel, I want to either question things, I want people to ask me about my practice, how I got into it, what I'm doing next, you know, I don't just want to be like, okay, so what do you think as queer people? No, no, it actually gets tiring. And people get tired of going to these things as well. I'm hoping you know, more people start thinking of better panel ideas, you know, I have not been on many panels this year, I think I've been in one actually. And it wasn't just photography, it was photography, a painter and a performance artist. And we were, yes, were black and queer, but we didn't even speak about that. It was more about our practices, and actually how they connected and the themes we explored. And honestly, that conversation was way too short. And I know if the ones were actually they are interesting, they are going to go deeper. They don't want to give the time. So it's really good to actually just sometimes do it yourself, you know, have these conversations with your friends, if you're tired of being on panels, remove yourself from it take the time to rejig, rethink. You know, I love when I go on a panel and people have conflicting ideas, because we're not the same. We are different people who have different ideas. Even in this, when you've been like, I'm gonna do it, like, get people thinking different, you know?

**Jessica Taylor** 32:45

What is photography for you right now? Recognising that throughout your career, your thoughts and approaches and processes towards photography, as the medium that you engage with has, of course shifted and will continue to shift.

**Ajamu** 32:56

Yeah, there have to be a shift from content. It was actually a lot of the conversations around content, dismissed that the photograph is an object as well. It's the thing it has its own thingness. Right. Yeah. So then, for me, photography, it is where I'm at in my career in practice, is how do we talk about materiality? In terms of actually how we engage with this thing called the photograph through the

senses and sensation, that's where my thinking is, in the context of the darkroom, what is front and centre actually is a black queer body, it is about touch, the tactility of sensation, and smells, or whatever you are not removed from your body. So then, once again, this is for me, why my darkroom practice and printing is so important, it is because it doesn't lose sight of my body. And then you could then go one step further, in terms of the social and cultural innocence, a lot of our black politics is wrapped into what is done to black bodies, and we should not lose sight of that. And I'm also saying, what is it that we want to be done with it through our own bodies and photography and the darkroom, allows you not to lose sight of flesh and skin, and that kind of material around the body and then making, you know, I touched the print, and the print also touches me that is a different conversation than this obsession with the social cultural context. So when actually, photography allows me to not lose sight of my body, and then also then learning platinum prints over the last four weeks, as part of my residency, apart from the risk and the challenges, the main feeling was I was, quote, unquote, "starting photography again". And then that keeps me kind of fresh and excited, learning something from afresh but also then to re-connect with a history that I've always loved and and been passionate about as well. So well, once again, this is then where the archive comes in, what is the history that you're always already part of? And where is your point of departure from that? And how do those two things sit? Simultaneously, all around? Do they rub up against each other? So in the darkroom, and the practice, and of this thing that I love, called photography, the love and the frustrations. That's what keeps me alive. It's simple as that. I think.

#### **Bernice Mulenga 35:25**

I had a friend do an essay about my work. And their name was Monique Todd. And in the essay, they made a comment, which I was like, I really like this. And it was like, in my work, it's not just about taking a photograph, it's almost given to you. And I'm like, you're like, that's how my photography works. But also, yes, you take it, and then you make it and then you give it back, which I love this, like kind of dialogue and cycle and loop, especially like, you know, you're saying how you're learning now. And I'm like, there's always something to learn, you know, whether it's a new way of making a new way of seeing a new way of doing, I love that. I'm at this stage where I'm just feeling. It feels like almost like when I first started again, I'm just like, oh, this is exciting. Because now I'm like, looking at something different. And I'm like, I'm just as excited as I was when I got my first role. And it was all like blaring and I was like, wow, this is great. You know, just because, I think it's just because I'm doing and I feel like with photography, it's like a rebirth. There's always something new to bring something new to see. And I kind of just like that. It keeps me on my toes. Again, that comes with its frustrations. But I think the overwhelming part of it is that it's actually quite a joyful thing to be able to do. And also not many people can do it, you know, as much as people are like, I could have taken that. Well, you didn't, and you can't, you know. And I think there's beauty and power in that. So that's how I'm trying to move a little bit.

#### **Ajamu 36:52**

And I'm glad you mentioned joy. Yeah, it because basically how they do talk about joy and pleasure, the erotic academic life here. Within the context of making this thing, call the photograph, there was a quote by Ansel Adams and it's something like, he talks about how you craft this thing called the image. And but then he said, all the books you've read, or the music, or the people that you've loved, or that comes into that moment, that you take this thing, this thing called the image or the photograph. And I think for me, in the darkroom, I still have this excitement about despite still seeing the print emerge, and

is that alchemy or magic, it still has to be part of one's process, because of the danger of us then being locked into these ideas, is that you forget that actually, there's something quite magical. And I think kind of magical alchemy, almost a dirty word is 2023. And actually, it still does that thing that I remember 30 odd years ago, and wow, is that how does an artist keep that thing? That the image did or emerged for the first time is how do you keep that alive? In your practice? Yeah,

**Bernice Mulenga** 38:06

The magic of your hands. That's what I'm thinking just the process of attaching something is just so childlike and freeing about it.

**Ajamu** 38:13

Yeah, yeah. And that's why we need to bring back the darkroom in the conversations of those black queer artists who make work via analogue.

**Jessica Taylor** 38:23

Is there an element of play, and experimentation in that as well?

**Ajamu** 38:27

Play and experimentation is central to the whole process. The studio is the place I play around with ideas. Yeah. And the Dark Room is a space where I really experiment just because you're also at the mercy of the chemicals, do what the chemicals will do. So once again, you got to allow that set of experiments to play and curiosity still got to be part of one's process, just because you will just never know what that moment in the darkroom will throw up, and then you're off troubleshooting, you come back again. And then it also thinking, Oh, my God, where I'm going, it's excitement. Because the danger of having a long term practice is to say to yourself, that I know it all. The work will die, it will be cold, cold, and die, and you want to keep that thing alive, somehow, somehow.

**Jessica Taylor** 39:28

And is that process of revelation in the dark room? Is that something that you ever like to share with others? Or is that it's a really solitary process?

**Ajamu** 39:34

It's both I think I like to nerd out with other photographers on that. So yes, and but then some of it is also very tacit as well. And you also then know something but then you want to don't know why you know, as well. So when you have to then try and be aware that it's not always obvious what you're doing it's because then I, well, I think that the work also has it's own agency and that means that the work also takes you where it takes you as well. So when actually, then either you're already open to that or you hate it. No, this isn't my work I do ABCD. But the work should take you into other kinds of directions. And then usually, that allows you to drill down into your ideas and theories that you're kind of working with.

**Jessica Taylor** 39:34

So one of the questions that we did share before was circling back to how Stuart Hall may have influenced your work or Stuart's thinking come up for you and your own kind of research and process

and engagement with text as something that of course I know will influence your practice in some ways. Could you both reflect a little bit on if you have engaged with Stuart's work, of course, Ajamu, I know you have directly. And what that influence has been?

**Ajamu 40:20**

Well, what is it about beautiful Stuart. The first thing is kind of Stuart was very supportive of the work and the work of Rukus. That was very important. I remember going to Stuart's house, and I sat in front of his bookcase, and he had at least 1000s of books. And I probably had about 10 books that he had on his shelf and I was so excited. Like, wow. And the thing that I that I take away from Stuart, is Stuart's voice. As Stuart's voice was very seductive. There's something about Stuart's voice that was very seductive. And Stuart us had a glint in his eye that was very playful, mischievous, even. I would then go off and say something, and then he would just say, Have you read this Ajamu? So when once again, is this character that I take also is that playfulness. That seductive voice. Stuart was was was key into a lot of the thinking around representation and identity. And the one thing that I will always take away from Stuart, is because Stuart loved artists, and with the way that Stuart would rather talk art just because he was always, Stuart was this eternal student. Someone who was curious, actually, about what the artist was doing. Yeah. So those kind of things that I take away is just how he supported, just listened, his curiosity, his playfulness. Lots of us would always say, Stuart was flirting with me. Right? Stuart was sleeping with me. But then Sonia and wants to go north, Stuart flirted with everybody, Ajamu. I'm like, okay, fair enough. So then it's all of that, and lots of us would have privilege. I'm 20. Stuart was there in our corner, if some shape or some form. And when I had the first exhibition, Stuart was very ill. And so he wrote a letter that we read out. So my thing was, even when he was ill, he is still tried to support the artist. And I guess that's the thing that I did take in and how I try and support other black queer artists. That is just the way that I think is the correct way to do things. So yeah, I was slightly tearful when I spoke about Stuart, but he was just an amazing, amazing person.

**Jessica Taylor 42:59**

Did you ever talk about new media? No, never would have loved to have been a fly on the wall for that conversation.

**Ajamu 43:07**

I saw their tagline for Rukus Archive is making difference work, that comes from Stuart. And when I'm tougher, then launch the film in Soho, Stuart launched a film by giving a talk. So naturally, a lot of the archival work comes straight out Stuart's work is just, it's central to all of the archival work and that we've done with Ruckus, the essays texts around the archive that's been seminal.

**Jessica Taylor 43:39**

Do you ever go back to any of his texts?

**Ajamu 43:42**

I went back to the texts on the archive. And then he talks about the archive unfolding and that kind of stuff. So when I go back to that text, and I think these are the shifts now Stuart, the conversation has shifted, but it's always nice to talk back to Stuart and say well actually, is because of these texts, we can now go here and then hopefully within my work and Bernice's work, and you know, whoever's work

in town, people would go thank you very much. But now we can go here are the nominee, this movie and then that's how it should be. I think. So then Stuart's work around the work allows you to go 'fantastic, great. Love it. And now' and that's i.t..

**Jessica Taylor** 44:28

Yeah. With his fingerprints still on it.

**Ajamu** 44:31

Still on it still front of centre and but it just, it just growth. Yeah.

**Bernice Mulenga** 44:36

So I used to do media studies and I was quite the person in my class actually, I really loved it and thought I would get on that route. But it was through that class I started to engage with Stuart Hall's work so you know, we used to look a lot about like how the media presents things and I know he's like, touched on that. So sometimes I'm always thinking about how the things were fed or produced by a group of people who are not even connected to it. You know, just to show an image, you know, I think a lot about when I was growing up in school, you know, how people in the newspaper, they'll literally say, Don't go to this area because this happened. But like, now, there's such a shift because it's like, oh, you know, this is very enticing. And then I'm always thinking about how we look at things, how we all interpret things, and why we see the things we do. I think my mom was very annoyed with it, because I was already that kid that was like, But why like, but why. So yeah, I'm always thinking about representation as well. So I feel like still horses aspect of a part of it, but also a lot of like, black woman, feminist text as well. Some of the things that pour into me, and so many things I've kind of made to understand or to adapt into my own life to kind of bring out into my own work. And you know what, I think I do say that sometimes at the time I began my work, I was just doing it, you know? And then with time, I've been like, oh, wow, okay, I see this, I understand that. It's great to also have people who are so good at writing and have the language for it. I think like, all of these are connected, you know, it's not just a photo that you look at. And that's it, you know, and I'm always trying to be in conversation with other writers. And you know, that will show me oh, you know, what your photography reminds me of this essay. And I'm like, okay, and I'm reading it. I'm like, Yeah, you know, I love when people connect things, as well as other themes I explore is movement and dance. So it's intimacy, but also how bodies move and how, you know, they shape and how they form or you know, how some don't move and how it changes. And all of this is a big brainstorm in my brain, that's just like, you know, going in different directions. So yeah, I'm definitely going to be revisiting more like videos and texts. I've got a couple of writer friends who are like, Okay, you need to watch this, you know, I've got to dedicate a couple of hours. But yeah, I'm always loving the dialogue that various artists have, because I think writers are artists too, you know, writers, photographers, musicians, so many of them go hand in hand, like, especially with my work, like life is quite a big part of it as well. And just like actually does nighttime in general, insomnia, I'm always partying, I like to do my best work at night, when it's quiet. So these are always things I'm like, kind of thinking about and trying to move with.

**Jessica Taylor** 47:13

One of the phrases that I jotted down when I was listening to Stuart speaking about your work, was the photograph as 'disruptive interface'. Is that something that you see the photograph as having the potential to do? Would you push back on it? What do you think about that?

**Ajamu 47:29**

Stuart always had a beautiful turn of phrase. I think that the photograph has got to do that kind of work, including how you disrupt ideas around black and queer too. So then, once again, you either don't move or get stuck in this boundary framework around things. The photograph, and the erotic photograph. Does that work? We can talk about sexuality as much as we want. But let's talk about sex. Okay, we can talk about desire as much as we want. But let's talk about pleasure. And then that's what then those photographs subversive is because it dares to go to those spaces. It's like saying, Don't go to these areas, right? Yeah, right. I'm just the kind of person that says, why don't you go? And then that's what the photograph has got to do that kind of work. If possible. It's got to just ask lots of other kinds of questions. But for me, it's not about finding answers. It's just how you just begin to ask other kinds of complex questions that's more nuanced. So that's what the work and photograph has got to do that kind of work. And then, of course, then the challenges for that, because I think that we still live in a society that as a fear of the erotic anyway, yeah. And the fear of pleasure. I also feel that lots of you might not agree with this, but that's fine. Lots of black queer politics is actually respectability politics, it, because then the question then begs what kinds of black bodies are left out of those visual representations, Kinksters, sex workers, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. The photograph hasn't got to do that kind of work to just as we as we have adopted things, just as a given whether or not I'm black and queer, that automatically makes me an activist or automatically makes me subversive, no it doesn't. And then that's part of the language that's put on people who are marginalised somehow, if you didn't have that dialogue, you're automatically an activist. So the work has got to do with that kind of questioning and challenging as well. Also, maybe in some cases is too much to ask the humble photograph, as well. You know, in some cases in cannot do that work. It just can't is because end of the day is just a photograph. And it's not just a photograph neither.

**Bernice Mulenga 49:52**

Yeah, I do agree that just because, you know, you sit in these intersections or identities that you're an activist, I think somebody tried to refer to me as one on life. Babes no, I know actual activists and the work that goes into it the time that goes into it, the pain that goes into it, you know, and I think a lot of people don't actually want to do the work and the research, you know, to become these things if there were serious, I think, so she would this way we live online, you know, and people speak on things. I'm like, That's not just it. And when you do question or back against that people will be like, we need to support and it's like, well, there are actual activists there. And, you know, I feel like sometimes people put it on like this thing, or Whoa, you're being seen in your visible, that's activism. And that's not, but I think it's good that more people are pushing back against it. But also on the erotic, I have been having conversation with other photographers and artists who are of my generation. And I do feel like it's missing in our generation a little bit. A little bit, quite a lot, actually. And I'm not sure why, you know, even when I have you explored that in my own work for myself portraits, people just want to over sexualise it, they don't really understand that that's not what their art is. And yeah, I've been just thinking a lot more about that actually, and how it's like really missing even though like, it's not actually missing from our, like, lives that we know, but I don't know, if people are afraid, you know, I don't know

what it is. But, you know, I also noticed that on my website have like, their self portraits up, and it's only like really getting a moment now because I'm pushing it because I've been given Oh, you can do what you want. I'm like, I'm gonna push that. And then it's, oh, well, you know, the school children can come with us because of this. And it's like, you know, over policing as well. And it's like, kind of, I think it stops a lot of people from being a lot more free. I think I had an image of two people kissing in the club, and you can't see their face. But I think because it's presumed that they're two like gay men with that is a problem. And I'm like, Well, you know, one was actually a woman and one was a man, both were gay. Both were queer, you know? So little things like that. And I'm like, Wow, imagine that's your reaction to an image I've taken of two people kissing What would you think of myself? My self portrait where I'm in the nude with my arm? You know, I'm just like, Yeah, can't hide it or so I'm just like, the more the better.

### **Ajamu 52:11**

Yeah, yeah. If you come out, let's say, Audrey Lorde. The use of erotic which is kind of the text I would go back to is that the erotic is not only a question of our what we do it is our acutely we are aware in doing that then expands the idea of the erotic already so well, that the means that the making of the photograph is erotic. If you're entuned to the moment, you're you're intuned to the body. Yeah. I think that there is a reluctance to talk about the erotic, because it's not seen as social justice work, right? Yeah. And erotic and passion, whenever is excluded from social justice work is because the erotic is still seen as personal and not political. And of those two things cannot be separated anyway. And I think then, if you want start to talk about the erotic and pleasure, you want to get into then think that's more messy, and more porous, as actually a lot of our politics kind of clean and tidy. They don't like the messiness of it. And because then the erotic there brings you back to your very body, your very flesh, and we live in a culture that then has a fear of the erotic. That's why there's a fear of talking about, guess what, actually, I like to be fucked and made love this way as a black gay man. Oh, no, you cannot say that. So naturally, a lot of my early work, was challenging to lots of black queers, because of the kind of stuff I was dealing with as S&M, kink, and blah, blah, blah. So then once again, that is the challenge with dealing with erotic and then the thing with lots of your museums and galleries is because they're basically civic spaces. Actually, it's about footfall. Yeah. And footfall is mainly through education. So when actually then some artists work wouldn't be excluded from that. And then also, then during the 90s, there was still the overarching ghosts of section 28, sort of once again, last semester, but then also then afraid to ensure particular kinds of queer work, the erotic queer work, so it actually, if some of us then did work around homophobia did that work would be on the wall, period. And then while that work is on the wall, isn't that to educate you? The reality is black and brown artists come into these spaces via education, not via the work. So then the erotic then in the mix of that. It's like ooo so then you've got all of this to deal with as a black queers. And you will talk about sex and lovemaking and fucking or whatever? And they're not asking for permission to be queer. Yeah. And they go back to the archive The more that LGBT history mainstreams itself and the archive is it becomes palatable and sanitised and cleaned up. Because then the conversation is that we want to be just like, you know, solving the archive and the history, then does that move the mainstream, it cleaves off it's, it's like sometimes it's not dirty. It's not gritty. It's not mischievous. It's not playful. It's quite dead actually, it's been straightened out. Literally queers and black queer that they don't talk about the erotic in terms of each other. If then, and then identify as a gay man, you are then identified as a lesbian, right? Yeah, this eco lust and desire is the whizzing around. But then it's because I have then taken an identity position where we can't talk about that, because you are this I am that. But actually, this thing is still

there. So we kind of flirt kind of discreetly, or whatever. But what then happens if we have crossed those lines, and we then begin to then radically rethink identity formation or whatever, through the body, and through sex and desire and pleasure. But it's too messy. And we don't like mess. And I think culturally, of black and brown folks, we also don't like mess. So all of that, I think is in there when we talk about this beautiful thing called the erotic. Yeah, your work on intimacy, it's, it's beautiful to see. There is still very few black queer photographers who do work around their material bodies. Yeah, identities of portraits, fine, but they don't deal with their nude or their sexual bodies, or their sexual identities. Sometimes, it's because some of them know that that work might not be shown in certain gallery spaces. And so when once again, you have to be mindful that you are they're not creating work just to fit in here. So you want to exclude and part of your own being.

**Bernice Mulenga 56:59**

I think that's funny, because it's like, when when you started it, you didn't start with these institutions and all that stuff. So it's so interesting, when people kind of denied themselves, because that's what you're doing. You're denying yourself, pleasure, denying yourself, and aspects of yourself. Really, I think, also people are uncomfortable, like, even just like, when I did have those nude self portraits up, like, people in my life, you know, me and people who didn't know me just like came in the comments, and just like, how people engage with it, or didn't engage with it, you know, it was, it was interesting. It was interesting, like, wow, I'm curious more just like, I kind of expected this, you know, there were some people who got it. And there were some people who were like, where did you take this? Like, why would you do this? Like, it's so different from like, the other work? You're showing them like, Well, yeah, that's the point of it, you know, and actually, I would love to do more like that. And actually, a lot more people wanted that as what I want to be involved in that, you know, I think I've had people ask me, okay, well, how would you approach somebody else? Like some ask the question I would have actually about how did you approach your subject, you know, but as a photographer, I know, there's many different ways. You know,

**Ajamu 58:04**

A lot of my subjects are ex lovers or fuck buddies.

**Bernice Mulenga 58:07**

Yeah, you've said that. There's a different level of trust there when it's someone that's your lover, even at the time.

**Ajamu 58:14**

Because then also, for me, there's something that I want the what to have is a particular kind of sexual charge. People sometimes can tell who are my lovers or fuck buddies just because there's something that people can get out of them. Once again, that's why ex lovers fuck buddies are people that I'm attracted to, who might not be attracted to me, there's still that sexual tension there. Something I still have to draw upon that. And I think then, going back to intimacy is someone that walks into your studio space, or wherever you've got seconds to be intimate with will try and get the kind of images that you want. So something else kicks in, yeah, so then how I work whoever is front of my camera, more often than not, there's something about them that I find desirable or sexy, something Yeah. And that's what I then pull towards the camera. And then also, then also then give me a gift image in that moment, as



well. Sort of, once again, you have to be open to that actually either might be the sitter that might do something that is quite quite natural to them, that they don't know is happening, but you see three went, That's it. So all of that is happening. All of that moment,

**Bernice Mulenga** 59:34

Something you said about something, you'll see in them something that you will find attractive or desirable is so interesting, because more time the subject doesn't find that part of themselves desirable or attractive. And sometimes it's until you pull that out and they see themselves differently. That's something I've seen within my work as well as someone's like, Oh, I've never seen myself like that, or I've never seen myself. Some people haven't actually seen themselves especially when Everything is stripped back and you're bear. This is like you in your true and your raw form. And there's even been that, you know, people discovering another part of themselves, that's something I've seen a lot as well, you know, or people make comments like, you know, I actually don't like getting my photograph taken, I always find that people who say that actually are the best people to photograph.

**Ajamu** 1:00:22

I totally agree, give me those shy people.

**Bernice Mulenga** 1:00:27

Right? Just give me five minutes. Yeah, there's a certain power that I feel like, and power in like more than the sense of encouragement that lot of us photographers have because, like I said, not everyone can do it. And it takes a lot as a person, you know, it's not just like, yes, I'm pressing the camera. It's like, there's so much to yourself that you bring to it.

**Jessica Taylor** 1:00:53

Thank you all for listening to the living archive series. Join us in two weeks when I speak to joy Gregory and Anthea Hamilton, as they share personal influences on their practices, the relationships between education and art making and what plant life can teach us about being in the world. Thank you and see you next time.