SHF x ICF_Living Archives_Intergenerational Conversations Between Artists, ep6. Alberta Whittle and Sekai Machache

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SPEAKERS

Sekai Machache, Jessica Taylor, Alberta Whittle

Jessica Taylor 00:11

Hello, I'm Jessica Taylor and welcome to the Living Archives series, CO produced by the Stuart Hall Foundation and international Curators Forum. This 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 program 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 Center on the Dynamics of Ethnicity, and Arts Council England.

Jessica Taylor 01:39

In episode 6 of Living Archives, I speak to Alberta Whittle and Sakai Machache about freedom, urgency and slowness, their many collaborations and their feelings about edges.

Jessica Taylor 01:52

Just to kick off, thank you both so much for being with us. It's so wonderful to have you both here. Alberta and Sekai, thank you for being part of the series. And my first question is very simple, very straightforward: It would be wonderful to hear when you both first met, and if it is at a different time when you first came across each other's work?

Alberta Whittle 02:13
Oh, my goodness Sekai, I don't know how to begin that question. When did we first meet? I feel like I was aware of you.

Sekai Machache 02:20
I remember like, vividly. Like it was a yesterday but it's actually funny because I tell the story to people all the time when they think I'm just crazy. I'm like, so yeah, Alberta just floated into my life. I remember being at my master's degree show at Dundee at DJCAD, Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art & Design where I did my undergrad and Master's. And you came into the space where my exhibition was. And it was like, I don't know, I just remember the moment like almost like it was like in slow motion. Because like I was like, there's a black woman here, there's another black woman here come in here to see my work, what she's been invited, like, by a mutual friend of ours, like, you know, it was like someone had said, Okay, you should go and see Sekai's exhibition. And so I just remember being like, astonished in a way like that someone had come specifically to see my exhibition at the art school by recommendation. And it was just a really lovely first meeting. That's, that's how that's what I remember.

Alberta Whittle 03:23
That's also what I remember. But also, I remember hearing of you, before actually meeting you. And so I feel like I was aware of your practice, before actually coming to your degree show. And I've been hearing all these amazing things about you, as an artist, but also as a person. And as someone who, in some ways, I was, I think I was inventing us as being family from the beginning, even before this meeting. And I remember I had my friend Lenore with me. And we were both just enthralled with your exhibition. But also you had these amazing zenes as well, you had like paperworks as well. And so I remember just thinking, okay, whatever is happening, because it's so rare that I actually meet like another black woman in Scotland, I need to have one of these, I need to have one of these zenes, so that it can also be there as a kind of, I guess, as part of an archive, actually. And I remember not long before that, I'd actually heard Eddie Chambers speak about the importance in preserving the work of black people, because so much of it was being destroyed. So much of it was being dismissed. And this meeting, much as with you, you know, it feels like it was really carved in my senses. And immediately, I felt like we were going to be incredibly close. And then we kept on coming into contact with one another, through all these mutual friends.

Sekai Machache 04:56
It was like once we met, we realized we knew so many of the same people and eere like in the same circles. And I remember going to 1-54 Art Fair for the first time. Like, yeah, and I, we went down. And you were there. And I was like, wait, hold on! like, it was actually maybe like a week or so after meeting for the first time suddenly seeing you again at 1-54. And just yeah, that was like, also quite amazing how like, once we've made that connection, it just kept coming back and back and back. But in terms of for me, like your work, I think in 2015, for me, there was a sort of gap because I finished my degree

show. You know, I had some some issues like some family and stuff that happened, that kind of put me in a place where I wasn't really able to really do anything. And like, I didn't get to really see your work until you're showing of your film. 'Mammmmmywata presents life solutions international' and I think it was at GFT, I can't remember it was GFT, or CCA, but I remember seeing it. And that was in 2016. So it was like there was a bit of a, we would see each other at different points. And then I kind of like disappeared a little bit and kind of spent a lot of time in my own space. And then into this next year, I finally saw your work properly for the first time. And I've never seen like any of your film work at that point. And I remember being sort of just blown away and fascinated by your style of editing, the sort of aesthetics, the symbolism, the storytelling, just like the way that you're so present in your work as well, your presence, your voice and the way that you kind of articulate the concepts that you're working with. And the collage style as well, that sort of brings together like several forms of filmmaking and framing. Yeah, it was just totally blew me away, because I hadn't seen anything like that like really before, and since. There's lots of lots of people who make film in that kind of collage style, but it's very specific and unique to you and your practice. So fell in love with it from the start.

Alberta Whittle 06:58
You are just so incredibly sweet. Because I mean, I feel like in some ways, I've been so influenced by your practice, and how you approach your work with a real degree of creating community and creating family, in particular, like your Yon Afro work, and the work you did for gi, Braiding Across a Pool. And it's this really incredible piece, because Sekai is someone who I think thinks so much about the collective, but also really takes care of the collective, and thinks about ways to forefront other artists at all times. And this performance, it still really sits with me because it's a piece where you brought together these different black women who became part of the Yon Afro, almost elders, part of the Yon Afro elders from Ema, to Adebusola, to yourself and others, and you're within the swimming pool, but you're creating this length of braid, that becomes a dividing line. And it becomes a rope. But also it becomes almost an entreaty into doing collective action, around bodily appearance, but also around racial stratification, but also around this idea of coming together. And when I think about the works you make, even though so much of the time, you know, they come from, whether they come from a dream state, and this deep spiritual work, which you do, they also come from this idea of bringing people together for collective action, and almost this idea of like, poetic imaginations of resistance, you know, because your work is so surrounded by poetry. And it's so embedded with these ideas of language. And sometimes, I think I returned to that piece because even though you know, words are few, there is a sense of symbiosis, of symbiosis and working together, and making images and making marks together, which can happen through instinct. And I wondered, you know, your drawing practice is something I've always been aware of, and how you mark time, but also how it you know, sometimes your drawings look so topographical, but also so much of the body. And I wondered, you know, it'd be great just to hear you speak a bit more about those because there's such an anchor point in your practice.

Sekai Machache 09:30
It's like, so nice to hear you talk about reading across the field. Because, you know, when you do something like a long time ago, and you just, yeah, it's it's somewhere in that archive of information and work that you've done, but do you like having someone kind of articulate again and bring it back into like, my present awareness and like, wow, yeah, that was really something. I felt like that work

happened very organically. It didn't feel like anything was forced or anything was really, there were certain things that had to happen as a result of things not happening the way they should have. And then in a way that fused it together and brought something more exciting and more kind of compelling into the space. But the drawings, I guess, like, they've been a kind of very central part of my practice for such a long time, because I, when I was in art school, I was really looking a lot at automatic processes like automatic writing and automatic drawing. And trying to bring forth this kind of like some subconscious information, which I could only access from the dream state into the hypnogogic state and try to capture it in these moments of, you know, just as I was waking up. And what I was trying to do was kind of access it in my conscious sort of state. So I've been doing automatic drawings, kind of abstracted pieces, just on like A5 pieces of paper, really, for years and years and years and be just sort of start the process for me when I'm thinking through, like, what's the next project? What is it that I'm trying to look at, what am I interested in discussing, and the next works. And they usually have a specific color scheme. So the first set were just black and white, and then the second set really black and red and white. And then that was part of a large body of work that was black, red and white for like about three years or something with lots of different projects involved in it. And then I went into my blue phase. My stereotypical artist blue phase. And I kind of made hundreds and hundreds of little blue drawings, which then got kind of elaborated into fabric works. And, and as you know that there's like a whole series that's very, very focused and devoted, and my research into indigo dye and the color blue. So, yeah, they're very much like a, something I've just always done, like, since I was very small at but like, now, it feels like it's very much integrated into the way that I make things I don't like the idea of ever experience in artists block. So they're like a great way to avoid that ever happening. Because if I get to a point where I'm not making something, I can just get a little sketchbook of A4 paper and start doing the drawings and that helps me back into the process again.

Sekai Machache 12:10
Yeah, I think one of the things that I remember seeing of yours that is not film work, and I remember being really, really mesmerized by it was your sculpture work that you did an art school. And it was like these, like, really intricate sculptural forms that were like encrusted with sequins and shells and glitter. And, yeah, they were just something that again, that had never seen before. And it was just like, I kind of felt like I was really lucky to be able to see them, because they were just like hidden away in your flat. And it wasn't like something that was out there exhibited in the world. So I just kept on being like, so why are you not showing more of this, this is like, amazing, but your last exhibition...

Alberta Whittle 12:50
You're so right, you're so right...

Sekai Machache 12:51
Yeah, people need to see that work. But the exhibition that you did recently, at the modern Institute, it's like kind of, I felt like that was going back to that sculptural work, the paintings that you've made, and the tapestry forms that have the sculptural pieces that are coming out of it with the raffia. And all of that those, I felt like that was really going back to that practice of sculpture. So I wanted to like sort of Yeah, hear more about making with your hands and going back to that again.

Alberta Whittle 13:20

Yeah. You know, it's funny, because I hadn't seen that relationship between those early, more sculptural, painting, assemblage colage, and these new paintings, until you and my mother said that. You and my mother both suddenly were like, but these two bodies of work have this relationship. And it's really now that I'm hearing you say this, I'm like, You know what my mom was right, you're right. And I think, you know, I have this funny relationship to edges. It's really weird. I don't know why I can't have a neat edge. And when I'm making like, even with my tapestries, or with the tufted works, or with the paintings, somehow they have to come out into the world. And I don't know if it's because, you know, it's a funny one, I think it has something to do with that edge, and almost wanting them to have a feeling where they could be picked up, or where they could be something of the body. Because the raffir is also you know, that's very much part of my costume. My like interest in costume and sculpture, but also, I think, just from, you know, thinking about things in relationship to my body. It's because I want the work to have these curves. I don't want things just to be straight. I want things which are not easily situated, maybe, maybe there's something about how things can be situated in a very clean way that I'm fighting against. You know, this is such a good question because I honestly have not thought about it properly until you said this, and my mum only said this to me like a week ago. So it's something which I have not sat with. But I think when I first started making sculptures at art school, it was because I wanted them to somehow be performative. And I pictured people in relationship to those sculptures. And maybe this is a way in which I can restore the painting works to have that same kind of feeling or that same potential. Because I've looked at the works without the raffia, or without the hoodies, or without the text, and it just does not work for me. I mean, those paintings have been flipped upside down on their side, every which way, I've seen them on the ground, I've seen them up high. They only really feel resolved. It's very rare. When an image goes out into the world and it has a neat tidy edge. It's very rare.

Sekai Machache 15:57
And I guess that happens, even with the film work, because you

Alberta Whittle 16:00
Yea there's no neatness,

Sekai Machache 16:02
there's a forced edge of the screen.

Alberta Whittle 16:04
Yes.

Sekai Machache 16:05
But then you'd never allow that to happen either.

Alberta Whittle 16:07
No.

Alberta Whittle 16:07
I can't, I can't have like thinking about it makes me stressed.

Sekai Machache 16:11
You're always like, okay, so what if we have it like slightly on its side with like, with this, and like, let's add some chains under the chairs. There's always like, kind of like installation, or another form of like, refusing that edge, and even when you're working with film, so I think that's quite an interesting thing to

Alberta Whittle 16:32
Sekai, you're just inside my brain. It's quite funny.

Sekai Machache 16:39
Yeah, cause we were talking just recently about this. We consistently kind of show up in each other's work. I had someone say to me recently, I was showing some students Alberta's film and there you were, and I was like, Yeah, I'll pop up from time to time, doing something different in each one. And then you've recently been working on some work with me as well, for some of my work, film work. And I think that kind of like how we kind of we meander through

Alberta Whittle 17:08
That return is really nice because we did that in Brazil. We did that in Brazil, where then I showed up in your work. And, you know, I found myself, I was on my journey back, I was going through, I think as we all do, I was going through my phone, I was looking at my pictures. And I had the little, I had the little golden shell, which you gave me when we were traveling to shoot. And I decided that was going to be my talisman for while I was traveling. So it's in my pocket. But now I've put it into my little passport case. But I was looking through and I came across the images which we took in Brazil, in the water with all of those different elements. And, you know, you spoke earlier about when you did the braiding across the pool about the planning that goes into things. And both of us are quite rigorous planners, you know, we have like a real aim when we do our shoots when we make work. But then often, as I think for both of us something will happen, something will happen, and then it will completely twist and not be

Sekai Machache 18:12
it will kind fall apart for a second

Sekai Machache 18:13
Just for a second and then somehow go back together.

Alberta Whittle 18:16
Yeah, exactly. And I'll go back together differently. But I actually think it's where the magic or what you really need that actually then kind of comes in the footage or comes in the edit or comes in the sound or comes in the performance or in the artwork. And you know, I think that happens to both of us a lot.

Sekai Machache 18:38
Yeah, there's a lot of flapping and freaking out for that moment while its all falling apart. Nobody gets to like see how ridiculous that whole process is. It's like, it's so beautiful once it's like, oh, this is the finished product. But actually there's been a lot of reconfiguring things and not allowing it to fall apart

completely as well and because we both work so much in collaboration with other people. It's really about the people that we work with and how much we trust them and their support around the work so that we're never alone with it. I've also really learned a lot about that kind of reciprocity and symbiotic sort of way of working through working with you and through kind of learning from you because for years and years you're kind of like yeah, like sister but also mentor and you say all the time that we learn from each other but I feel as if like for me there's

Alberta Whittle 19:29
We do you definitely mentor me.

Sekai Machache 19:31
Yeah, but there's definitely been those like a few couple of years when I was still kind of finding my feet I guess, where I would be like Alberta, what do I do? How do I respond?

Alberta Whittle 19:43
It will be fine. It'll all be fine. And it has been and your work is amazing. I'm looking forward to when we get to show together again because I feel like that show in Brazil was one of my favorites. You know a lot of that was because of that bringing together of community in communion thinking of these ideas. And you know, there was something incredibly special about that because I think in both of our practices is this idea of trust. And then when you trust other people, or when you trust the situation really quite generative and magical things can happen. And that's how it felt when we installed that show. You know, it's better than both of us could ever imagine.

Sekai Machache 20:25
Definitely, yeah, it really was. It feels like a dream, actually, because it happened before lockdown.

Alberta Whittle 20:32
Anything before lockdown is a dream.

Sekai Machache 20:35
It was right, it was 2019. So it was like, right before everything really changed. And we kind of had an idea, didn't we, we had like an inkling that something strange was coming. And we didn't know exactly what that was going to be. But that I felt like that show, was like an opportunity for us to kind of share together before, whatever, before the storm. Yeah, that came before the storm.

Jessica Taylor 20:58
Can you both offer a bit more of a framing of that project of what that project was? And what you presented? And was that your first collaboration? Or was that if it was not, when was your first collaboration together?

Alberta Whittle 21:11
The first collaborations really hard to think of, I mean, the only thing I can really think of is maybe when you helped me with from the forest to the concrete to the forest, like that's from your formal collaboration. So, in 2019, again, and 2019 I had a solo show coming up in Dundee, which is Sekai's

kind of hometown for a long while. And I had made this film Between a Whisper and a Cry, which, you know, Sakai had seen and given feedback on and was incredibly supportive about, and also during the installation. But then, when Hurricane Dorian happened in the Bahamas, and it was creating just that, the horror of devastation across the Americas and very particularly in the Bahamas, I felt I needed to make a response to it. And very, very quickly because I felt so little was being reported in the UK and Sakai came to support. Because I was working in Dundee was actually during install that I was making this film. And Sakai lent all of her support and came behind me and encouraged me, but also lent her voice to the narrator in the film, reading this wonderful text by Octavia Butler, from the Parable of the Sower. And I mean, maybe that's the most formalized way. But then this opportunity came up...

Sekai Machache 22:37
Yeah, this was a something fell on our laps that we couldn't have imagined. I've been in Brazil in 2018, for a delegation of Scottish creatives. And people were involved in the Scottish art scene, went to the Women of the World Festival in Rio, so was the first ever Women of the World Festival in South America. And I went there and made some connections with a few people. But I'd never been to Brazil before. And I came back and there was an opportunity to, you know, do some more work in Brazil, through the British Council over there. So kind of like wrote up an application, but also at the same time I met this Brazilian artist, curator, dancer and Ana Beatriz Almeida. And we had some conversations about like, how we could go back to Brazil, what we could do if we were gonna go back there, what was it that we really needed to say or to engage with? And she was kind of concocting this idea of like a residency, which would take place in Cachoeira, in Salvador da Bahia sort of area in the north of Brazil. And she invited us to be part of this residency called the Death and Life Residency. And so it was like myself, Alberta, Toolani, Russia, Sabrina, Henry, we all came over from Scotland, and managed to pull the resources together to go. And then we decided to also do an exhibition to kind of like formalize the British Council kind of like funding an exhibition. So we curated for the first time together, we've kind of shown up in each other's work in other ways, but then this was a curatorial project. And we made art for it as well.

Alberta Whittle 24:25
And yeah, yeah, it became a really interesting way for us to really have an experiment with our curatorial ambitions. And we wanted there to be this sense of moving through space to really think of colonial legacies. So for instance, it was really important for us to bring artists from Scotland to Brazil, and we found two sites for a network. So Danilo Garcia, who's a wonderful curator, he provided a space for us in one side of Brazil and then Sekai through her networks found a space for us to show in Cachoeira. And Campinas and Cachoeira are two very different environments. Campinas is one of the last places that slavery was abolished, and Cachoeira was one of the first places in Brazil this is. And the conversations were very different. But also, it really felt as though there was a sense of being part of a global conversation throughout the different events, we were part of, the different talks we gave. And there was also a feeling of gaining an understanding of the local perspectives around race and representation specifically in curatorial practices, which we hadn't anticipated understanding in the same way.

Sekai Machache 25:43

Yeah, and I think that the communities were very different as well, like what we experienced when we were in Cachoeira, sort of like the part of Brazil that has the largest black population, very historically significant and culturally significant to the spiritual, the cultural, the historic legacies of slavery in Brazil. And then Campinas, which was very different, again, like you were saying, and coming from one to the other, was like that journey itself was quite significantly impactful to the actual exhibition and the project itself. We couldn't have created those conditions on our own. I think it was just those conversations that were happening, who we were working with, how we were going to make these things happen. And then when they did, it just spoke so much of Brazil and like how complex that society actually is.

Alberta Whittle 26:36
Because when we were showing in Campinas, it almost felt as though we then accessed a whole different black Brazilian community who were able to really speak to us from their firsthand perspectives of the lack of opportunities for them as black Brazilian women curators, but also how there was this expectation that as a curator, you wouldn't necessarily be black, and you wouldn't be a black woman. And so, you know, thinking a lot of the conversations we'd had were around fugitivity and maroonage. We did a lot of site visit to spaces where there was maroonage happening in the hills in Campinas. Cachoeira, but also speaking with different closed spiritual organizations, the Sisterhood of the Good Death, and then being in Campinas, it was a really interesting place, and then kind of connect these ideas within the same country within same continent, but then also really reflect back the perspectives of what was going on in Scotland, which was really going through quite a big fundamental change and representation. Because I mean, I feel like I can say, really, you know, honestly, up until that time, there was minimal support for black artists in Scotland. But also, if there were exhibitions showing black artists work, they were rarely from Scotland, they might be from London. So it's this idea that blackness was really located in the metropolis. It's something which could be happening in England but could not possibly be present or active or questioning in Scotland. So there was a real sense of geographical isolation, I think in all of the different spaces where we presented this work or where the work was developed. And in some ways, I think that's still really fed into so much of our practice, because, you know, our friendship really was formed in, you know, the mid 2010s, 2015. And now, actually thinking eight years later, there has been a shift. But also, it's really interesting, because I feel like almost, we're holding this very real lived archival knowledge of what it means to be black and Scottish because Sekai grew up in Scotland, and I have lived in Scotland all of my adult life, and we have witnessed changes. But also, there's a real kind of, I think, still anxiety, about where, and how the work of black artists is going to find its space, and that this won't just be seen as a momentary blip, or something like that. I've certainly been questioned about when this moment is going to be over. And you know, that that does cause significant anxiety.

Sekai Machache 29:16
I've had that like posited to me as well. I think that the idea that it's a temporary thing like this interest in what we're seeing and what we're doing in our work, it's very present and it's very present in the opportunities themselves like that the opportunities that we've been able to like experience and benefit from have, I feel come out of leaving, because we talked about this idea of like button has been located in the metropolis, but actually, when we left Scotland to do something in another place, that's when all of a sudden there's a there was visibility of our work coming back to Scotland after representing the country in another space. And that I think is just....

Alberta Whittle 29:18
It's troubling.

Sekai Machache 29:22
Yeah. Another thing I wanted to sort of like bring up is the intergenerational aspect of that project in Brazil. Because the Death and Life Residency there was, there were elders who we were in commune with, who had been invited to participate in the residency. So there's this kind of like, cross-generational aspect of it. And then when we were in Campinas, interestingly, there was another kind of experience of this intergenerational thing, because there were these elder women who were being supported by Danilo and the Subsolo Gallery to curate and exhibit work. And then there were these young, young people who were part of that community were kind of invited along to be at the exhibition. And we also did some teaching at one of the local sort of universities as well. So there was this, definitely a lot of like intergenerational kind of learning and sharing that was happening while we were there as well. It was really beautiful.

Alberta Whittle 30:58
Yeah, definitely.

Jessica Taylor 30:59
I think it was kind of a couple points that I want to pick up on there. Which one to start with. First, going back to the conversation around Scotland, it would be really interesting to hear from you, Alberta, how you have, if you have been able to open up dialogues, around your representation of Scotland in the Venice Biennale , that you feel can capture and engage with the complexity of that representation that you've just mentioned earlier, on the ground in Scotland? But also, I think what is so fundamental to both of your work that you've touched on already, is this dialogue between the local and the global, and the transnational. First of all, implicating Scotland and wider global narratives and histories. And, you know, centering diaspora within your conversations around Scotland as well.

Alberta Whittle 31:54
When I was invited to represent Scotland, at Venice at the Biennale, I really was deeply surprised. But strangely, those conversations actually began with Sekai in Brazil. So conversations began from 2019. And even though I was still incredibly surprised that I had received this accolade, it was something which, you know, in some ways did make me quite anxious. You know, I've lived in Scotland longer than I've lived in Barbados now. And I do really hold that Scottish identity, you know, like, very much in one hand and Barbados than another. But there was also an anxiety about feeling or appearing to be tokenized. And that was something which was definitely raised to me that I could be seen as a token in doing this work. And with that in mind, I really wanted to reflect on the ongoing conversations that were very important to my community conversations I've had with Sakai numerous times with people that we hold close to us, and really try and actually make the exhibition in circle, a global conversation, and it is very much about diaspora, because most of us hold dual identities. You know, we do hold a very strong dual identity, which I think is in some ways, a very British and European phenomenon, more than an North American phenomenon. I think in Britain, that questioning of who you are, who you really are is something that happens on a daily basis to most people of color, or people who have an accent. And I

was aware that with this commission, it was not just my voice, I would be representing it might be my perspective and a perspective that is nurtured through conversation with the diaspora. But it is something which is much more outward facing. And when the exhibition was being installed. I did find myself really thinking about, you know, the exhibition is so much about, it's about grief, it's about family, it's about building community, it is about loss, it's about police violence, it's about abolition, it's about freedom. And there was already an anxiety that this exhibition would be out of date, the conversations would have shifted, because so much of my work is about responding with a great urgency. You know, the work I did with Sekai on 'From the Forest to the Concrete to the Forest', that was edited and filmed and finished within less than two weeks. I think it was 10 days. I like to work in that way. I feel very comfortable working urgently. And, you know, as we saw, even in the run of the exhibition, which was from April to November, the number of black people in the UK being murdered by the police. Those numbers just went up and up and up, you know, with Chris Kaba in September, with different people during In the summer, those numbers kept on going up. It was a reminder that we're still living in times of deep peril for black people. And also that these conversations about change and freedom and police violence really need to continue to be at the forefront. But so much of that is a conversation about diaspora that really does have its roots in chattel slavery. And I think, even though Sekai and I, you know, we have different backgrounds because family are Zimbabwean and mine are Barbadian, there are loops, there are loops of history that still bind us together in how we approach making work. And how we approach making work that centres very much on understanding self and understanding place and understanding history and ideas of futurity about where are we going. And I think that's one of the reasons why I love working with Sekai, is because all of my work comes from a conversation. And it can come from very diverse spaces, from people I meet in transit, at the bus stop at the train stop, or deep conversations with my friend and sister in the studio, or having a cup of tea. And so it's these conversations, which really fascinate me because it is about thinking about these overlapping identities, and where we're going. And you know, this recent work, which, you know, you've been doing since last year to this year, 2022 to 2023. You know, I'm really curious about how you speak about that language of diaspora Sakai, through this idea of like a poetics of futurity, and how there are these layers, which I know speak of similar ideas of mine, but that are presented, you know, through a different lens.

Sekai Machache 36:52
Yeah, I honestly think that when I think about how your sort of practice has supported and influenced mine, I think a lot about how, sometimes we say things very poetically, and very indirectly, and sometimes we say things very directly. And I remember, when I saw, Lagareh, your film, Venice Biennale, I think it was one of the first times that I felt that you had no choice but to speak very, very directly to the weight of these issues. It was almost like the moment was given to you to speak very clearly and very directly to our current and present condition as black people in this world. And it was very, very moving. And I felt the way that I've been approaching my relationship to these issues, the historical, and the present. And thinking about, like how we kind of envision futures, potential futures for black people. And the way that we're represented and the way that we appear in this world and experience this world, I have kind of Lent more towards the more abstracted more poetic and more kind of, sort of like a strategy of drawing people in through the sort of beauty of what it is that I'm making, and through the poetics of what it is that I'm making, and then sort of quite subtly engaging the challenge, the resistance through that process. And the the work that I'm currently making is kind of

bringing together several different artists who I love, including yourself, to engage with the notion of spiritual resistance.

Jessica Taylor 38:29
Can you both speak a little bit about, because I think it's incredible, the multidisciplinary nature of both of your practices? Can you speak a little bit about that, and the way that you approach thinking about what medium you want to engage for a certain work?

Alberta Whittle 38:47
I don't think there's an approach

Sekai Machache 38:53
Yes, suddenly, I'm doing this! But yeah, I think there's definitely a lot of playing with materials and playing with concepts and then finding yourself suddenly doing costume work out of nowhere. And also, because they're making film and the photographic work we're performing there is the, the body and how we kind of engage the body in the work. So one of the early things I learned to do was kind of all of the production on my own, which was being the subject, doing the body painting, doing the costuming, creating the entire set, and then creating the sort of like Tableau images. And that was like, that's always how I've worked. Like only recently have I invited other people to be like, Oh, could you help me with the costumes? Could you help me with the makeup? Could you help me with the...? and so like that having other people's eye in their vision in the work has sort of become like a huge aspect of it. But yeah, I think the medium isn't, doesn't drive for me the work. It's the idea, the concepts and who I want to work with, and what I want to learn through the work as well that drives it.

Alberta Whittle 39:59
I don't know, maybe I'm a little different at times. I mean, I've always worked in different disciplines. And interestingly, when I showed my work to Sonia Boyce, when she was doing this visit to Barbados, at the Community College with Alison Thompson, she said to me, you know, what does it mean to work in this interdisciplinary way? You know, do people get your work easily by working across mediums, and she said, you know, this might become, this might be perceived as a barrier for people being able to access your work, but she said, you know, just forget about that. And just continue making work that feels right for you. Because I think like Sekai and I, she's also such an interdisciplinary artist. And I think, you know, depending on the project, I'll need to use my body in a different way. Like much is how Sekai does her drawings. And her drawings have become a part of her practice, for her brain to be shifting, or resetting or reimagining a different world. There's a lot of tooing and froing, in my work as well. So making films, making artists videos, artist films, is a relatively new part of my practice. As Sakai is highlighted, you know, my work prior to that was so much more sculptural, so much more about assemblage and like building, building objects, building things, and making films, I was always making the footage, but I wasn't always editing the film. So for a long time, I would have video cameras have always had a video camera of some sort, even if it was just an old fashioned digital camera, which would shoot a bit of footage on and I would then just store them on hard drives or many DVDs, sometimes without a definite purpose. And then the same way, I gather materials and objects and things which live in my studio and take up a lot of room and my studio then becomes very chaotic, I will have these things as almost another texture to play against. And sometimes the body just knows what it

needs to do. So for instance, with this recent work, I've just reconfigured a reimagined and existing work, it's the film 'Between a whisper and a Cry', and the installation, which was first shown in Dundee for an exhibition in LA. And even though we're following a similar format, showing the film projected, and I built our Machado house structure, my body told me they needed to be this way to bring in a feeling of meditation, a feeling of naval strings, of ancestral ties of Kinship, of bonding, of feeling togetherness, and of also, in some ways, mirroring this feeling of underwatery-ness, of liquidity. So I ended up shifting things to make these beaded works, which then became part of the installation. But that's also in some ways some of the quiet work that I might just be doing in between another body of work, that then feels right instinctively to add that bit of texture, that other layer in the story, because the work is very much about telling a story. And so sometimes you need to have these different components, or I need to have these different components in my work for things to hold the audience and hold the audience with a particular tension. But also, it's sometimes really interesting. I don't know if you've had this experience Sakai, where you're presenting a work that has already been shown before. And then when you're showing it in a different environment, how because you've grown and you've changed, the conversation has changed, you sometimes feel like okay, well, I need to locate this much more situated in this environment, whether it is the built environment of the gallery space, or the situation, or the literal geographical considerations of that space. I found that really interesting, I guess method in the practice, because I date my work so explicitly, like all of the works are dated very, very explicitly, to say this is from a particular time. And yeah, I kind of I think that way in which the body feels in time, allows the work to feel a bit more like a diary, or some kind of archive archival moment.

Sekai Machache 44:38
Yeah, I think that idea of working specifically to not just to fit the work into a gallery space or to a site but to actually like, create the space that the work will sit within as well like the way that you have with your fabrication of the of the house and the installations that kind of like the work sits within and becomes kind of world building within the space as well. That's something like for me, I have always been really interested in, in creating immersive environments, spaces that take you somewhere else as you experience the work. And so even if I'm making a photographic work, I always make sure that there's some element of that photograph kind of coming out and into the space as well, or a performance that it's kind of engaged with the work as well. And I was thinking about something that I've learned recently, through the way that I'm starting to work more, I'm taking a slower pace. And I'm really sitting with every aspect of what it is that I'm going to do and trying to express the multidisciplinary and kind of like, multi dimensional sort of form of my work more and more, because you know, when people will just do this always hates me, oh, you're a photographer. And I just be like, I don't know how to explain to you that photography is like the very last thing that happens. And so yes, I'm a photographer. Yes. But it's just in that moment, when that shutter,

Alberta Whittle 46:12
what's the first thing that you begin with, then like, if you were thinking of...?

Sekai Machache 46:16
The first thing is probably the like, it used to be the dream that I'd have, you know, right, I'd have this dream. And the d reaming is, is work for me, like I go to sleep, and I'm active in my dreams. I'm very lucid. And I'm very aware that my dreams are very vivid. I used to think that they were happening to

me, but now I'm more kind of aware of like, this is part of the work. And so I have to be very present in my dreaming, and then the writing down of those dreams and the kind of pulling from that the subconscious space. So then the drawings can help me to like keep engaging with that. And then the conversation similar to what you're saying that like having conversations with friends, with family, with people who just you meet in happenstance. And that kind of becomes also part of it. And because I've recently had my diagnosis of ADHD, and thinking about neurodiversity, and the way that my brain works, I can't do one thing, it's not possible. And I'm in a way I'm harnessing this aspect of ADHD that's considered problematic, where we jump from one thing to another to another. But I'm actually using this to my advantage and saying, Okay, I feel like doing a painting today, I'm going to make a film, I'm going to work with dance, like, it just allows me to have a lot of versatility and never get bored of what I'm doing ever. And that's really, really important when you've got ADHD, avoiding boredom and avoiding stagnation, because then you don't finish work and you don't finish things that you're not interested in, not because you don't care about the work, but because it's actually quite painful to continue to work on things that are not feeling enjoyable, which is a very strange aspect of ADHD. But it's a very true one. So I do think a lot about how I'm working with my self, rather than against myself these days. So I'm taking a slower pace. I'm inviting other people in to help me to support me and to then also co-create as well.

Alberta Whittle 48:15
That's beautiful. I think it's really that something which you said about pleasure really resonates with me, because if you're lucky, and the work feels, it's obviously challenging and hard at times, but finding time when the work you're making is deeply pleasurable. I think it's really useful like my paintings for me, even though sometimes they're about working out quite difficult things. And they very much come from my dreams, they are a space of meditation and of reflection and of deep joy and pleasure, which is a really interesting shift, because when I'm editing, I can be so angry, I can really be deep state fury editing. And I think I need both. It's that balance. So often, when I'm editing. There's that time for editing and I'll be very obsessive about it. But then for probably because I like to time it where I've got time to ignore it for a while and let the ideas settle or the dust settle. I'll go and do some painting and or do some watercolors or something that my brain works with in a very different way and different material to give me a bit of ease, to give me a bit of ease and a bit of pleasure and then I can come back and be very rageful as well as loving in the editing work.

Sekai Machache 49:40
Yeah, I think there's that element of play isn't it as well. Like I remember the other day when we were filming, we're doing this filming and there was like a moment where there was a little bit of a stressful thing happening. I don't know what it was, but there's something happening things were removed. And then my friend Fiona and I just were like should we just go? Should we just go and pour some honey into this pot? Should we just put some shells in this pot and pour some honey in it should we just go and play for a second. So we went and did this really strange little, like, ritual, for a sec. And it was so pleasurable, it's so fun to do. And it just kind of calmed us down. And then it ended up finding its way into the work. So it was this weird thing. That was like really just a moment of like, we can't be in this right now. We need to just step outside and do something completely different. Yeah, yeah.

Alberta Whittle 50:38

Absolutely. Absolutely.

Jessica Taylor 50:41
This series is called Living Archives, which is, of course, rooting us in Stuart Hall. And I know, Alberta, being in dialogue with writers and text has been, you know, so important for you. I wondered if you both could share some insight into the writers and texts that, that move you that you call on in your work? And, and if Stuart is one of those writers of Stuart's work is something you have engaged with, it'd be really wonderful to hear.

Alberta Whittle 51:09
You know, I think Stuart Hall is such an elder, in all of our practices, especially I think, when, you know, we really start thinking about creolised identity in Britain. But also, I think, especially for me, coming from a Caribbean perspective, you know, as him being Jamaica, and having that journey, that in some ways, you know, when I think about artists, or writers, or poets, whether they're my contemporaries or not, I tend to think of them within this idea of like a kinship, you know, a satellite of kinship ancestors. And he's very much one of them in particular, and how he's spoken so much about art, but especially about, you know, the need for representation within visual identities. And I think so much of his writing really has laid the framework for artists like Sekai and myself to really challenge the perception of ourselves. But also, in some ways is more intimate writing about colorism and race and generational trauma, I found really interesting to think about, especially in terms of opening things up to global perspectives, you know, around diaspora, because my perceptions of my race will be very different when I'm in a different environment. And the same for Sekai. You know, and also how that relates to ideas of authenticity, and Britishness are still very much at the forefront. I think of the work which artists like Sekai and myself are doing, because they haven't changed that much since Hall's time. They're still very much called into question. You know, who can authentically speak of Britishness? That's why it was such a big surprise to me, when I represented Scotland and may have been a surprise to Sekai, when she's representing Scotland, when she's invited to do international projects. You know, besides Hall, I would say, Kamau Brathwaite and how he speaks about nation language as a way to claim space, but also really understand how we come from a creolized perspective, and his work on nation language. You know, I think that's why when I think about my poetry or my writing, it's always to be read aloud. It's always to be read aloud. It has never really to be read in the head. And, or just in quiet. You know, the way in which he's taught me that is something which I've always been aware of, you know, think Hall found me in Britain, but Kamau found me in Barbados, you know, from a child. And so, you know, they're both very much elders, who support my imagining of who I want to be in terms of my identity as a person of dual identity of Barbadian-ness, but also of Britishness, and there is the way in which in some ways, I think their work for grounds Edwidge Danticat work on creating dangerously and that compact between artist or writer an audience, which I think also defines some of the hostility and anxiety that is surrounded Both Hall's work or Brathwaite's work really reminds me of how critical this deep questioning of authenticity, of language of identity are still so important, because there is still a deep hostility towards questioning these ideas, and, you know, returning to diaspora, this is universal. These are universal questions that are still finding roots, whether you're in the States, whether I'm in Barbados, whether I'm here in Glasgow, they're questions that are everywhere. And, you know, these are roots, which I think, you know, in my writing, I'm trying to pick up on in my poetry explicitly in Sekai's writing and her research, you know, we're all still very much reimagining what these ideas of freedom

are. There's that great Saidiya Hartman quote, which I used in one of my films, you know, the everyday right to live free, are we actually free? Are we actually free right now? And the fact that I'm asking that question, you know, even though all signs would point at me, you know, someone who's had tertiary education, someone's had the privilege of British passport, someone who's had the privilege to make art, you know, you would assume I am free. And and there's a contradiction to that freedom, because obviously, in certain environments, I'm not, you know, crossing the border into the US last week was terrifying, I still didn't know what was going to happen. It's these moments of precarity, where you really question your freedom, and try and imagine what freedom looks like that you really are reminded how far we have to go. But also how important these conversations are. The last text I'm going to speak about is this one by David Scott, from Small Axe, where he speaks about friendships. And that texts, you know, I read it when I was a committee member, at Transmission Gallery, from 2016 to 2019. And when I read that text, we were changing transmission to be a space which supported the work by black artists and artists of color. But also the committee was 'decolonizing', as we called it, then into a committee of only black artists, and artists of color. And David brought this amazing exhibition to the gallery, Caribbean Queer Visualities and he spoke about friendship as accomplices in that Small Axe text, and that really shaped how I recognize my friendships now, which is why Sekai can symbolicly, not symbolically she can, she can be a sister, she can be a real sister to me, and she can be a real friend, but also she is an accomplice, she is an accomplice in my work, because we both understand that the conditions that we are making our work are undeniably hostile. And that as much joy and pleasure that we find in our worlk through our dreaming practices, through our making practices to our communion together, that there will still be this hand that wants to take away our freedom.

Sekai Machache 58:10
Yeah, I haven't had, I haven't given myself an opportunity to delve really deeply into the work of Stuart Hall, you know, you're kind of like, I will get into that, at some point, and will really, you know, lose myself in that work. But I it's impossible to ignore the impacts of his work and thinking about this sort of, like how he references three waves of black artists and so like the Windrush generation, like this generation with like Sonia Boyce and her contemporaries, and then this, like, third wave that we can have exist within, emerging into like, at the moment, which I feel really grateful, and honored to be able to reclaim membership of, I think a really important act of resistance is like actually naming ourselves and naming each other and giving that kind of weight to the work that we're doing. Because, yeah, like giving credit to those who have influenced us, like the elders who've, like kind of given, shaped the way and forge the path for us, and then also been able to lay claim to our own impact, because we're making the work, because it's important, it's necessary. And it's not easy. It is pleasurable in the ways that we've discussed, but it takes a lot to process our experiences and the the weight of the histories that have been unfairly placed on our bodies. So I feel like that kind of, it's very much about being able to like see each other. And like really, witness, we've talked about this the other day, when we were talking about Christina Sharpe and her work with the in the week, and the concept of like week work and what it means to in a way to be responding to histories that have shaped the way that we're seen in the world. And then to also be presently experiencing these things. As as well. And then also in the process of visioning futures like we have to kind of find new ways of expressing a life or a potential future where we're not feeling this tension of whether we're free or whether we're not free. I don't know if that's something that can exist but I want to keep on trying to imagine a future where we can truly say that that that we have experience in our to have attained that freedom that feels so elusive.

Jessica Taylor 1:00:28
Thank you for listening to the sixth and final episode of this season of the Living Archive series. Living Archives was brought to you by the Stuart Hall Foundation, an International Curators Forum, with funding from CoDE the Center on the Dynamics of Ethnicity, and Arts Council England. Please make sure to follow ICF International Curators Forum on socials, and we urge you to sign up to the Stuart Hall Foundation's newsletter so that you can be the first to know about their latest events, residencies, scholarship opportunities and commissions. Thank you all for tuning in for sharing news of the series with your networks and for supporting this important project. On behalf of the Stuart Hall Foundation and International Curators Forum, I'd like to extend a very special thank you to all of the contributors for making the time to speak with me, for their critical interventions, their work and for generously sharing their hopes and observations with us all.