

Our Stories: Reflecting on Black British History in Four Objects Transcript

0:08

Who am I? I'm a mum, I'm a photographer, I'm a human being. That's enough to know.

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What I want people to do is to look at my work and take something out of that.

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Hi, my name is Liz Johnson Artur, I am an artist and photographer.

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We're here today because in 2018 the Guildhall Gallery acquired a piece of work of mine and we came here to have a look at it.

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I came to London in 1991.

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I was on my way to New York and I thought I'll come to London first for maybe a year and then move on.

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But, I stayed.

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I think what I realized arriving in London and particularly being based in South London is that actually the people that I want to photograph are right here.

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What I saw when I came to this gallery which I did as research is that there is something that reflects everyday life

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but there wasn't anyone that looked like the people that I might archive.

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So, I felt like let's respond to this.

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I was aware that I was the first female artist of colour whose work the gallery wanted to acquire,

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so my thought was how to bring in my work, which is based on photographs of the black diaspora

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into a gallery that has really not much of that representation

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so I think let's go and have a look.

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I call my work The Black Balloon Archive after a song that I heard by Syl Johnson,

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and I liked the first line of this song because it sort of described bright blue skies you go out and you are bound to bump into a black balloon,

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And I feel like this when I do my work.

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I go out and I am bound to find someone that I'd like to take a picture of.

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Yeah, it's nice to see.

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It's been here since 2018 and I haven't been able to come by but it's very nice to see.

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There is one thing about work being acquired, a lot of times it is not hung, so I was actually quite happy that the gallery hung it.

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Let me take you through some pictures.

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What I did here was really trying to represent the work that I do through the pictures that I have been doing since around '91.

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There's a picture of a church service in Elephant & Castle,

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And I basically just walked up and asked if I could come in and take pictures and they let me come in.

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It's one of the first pictures that I actually took when I came to London and for me it's as relevant as a picture that I took in 2018.

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I didn't grow up with any black community,

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so for me anything from a wedding to a birthday party to a club to people on the street

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to me, everything is interesting.

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This is a picture from a club called PDA that used to run for quite a few years,

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And it was a place that sort of created a certain warm place for black and brown LGBTQ people.

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I wanted to represent the LGBTQ community because I think it's something that is not talked about enough, particularly not in context of black culture.

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One of the things about my work is that I don't have categories, I don't have priorities.

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I think, for me, creating my own archive means I can keep everyone on the same level.

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I go to different places.

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I sometimes encounter people on the street, like this gentleman who just walked past me,

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And I just asked him if I could take his picture.

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Sometimes I see places like churches and I ask people if I can come in.

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In this case, I was allowed to go to a Baptist church and they allowed me to take pictures.

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This was a Nigerian birthday party.

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All these moments for me are important because they need to be as I like to think elevated,

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Because a lot of the work that you see here whether it's paintings or other photographs also represent everyday life.

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It's just - it's not the everyday life that I encounter.

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I think we can demand to go to a place like this gallery, which is in the heart of London,

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and to encounter art that relates to all of us.

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So hopefully, in 50 years' time, it's not a big deal to see pictures like mine in a gallery like this.

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Being able to see work that has something to do with who you are is encouraging,

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and I think young people should not stop in front of anything that tells them you can't do that.

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So any sign that says you're not welcomed - important to open that door.

English (United Kingdom)