

Sonia E Barrett, '9 Nights' Transcript

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My name is Sonia E Barrett.

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I'm a visual artist.

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I work with found objects.

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For many years I've worked with furniture, using furniture as a tool to try and think about objectification and the objectification of people and animals and plants, how we can move from objectification to individualisation and strategies of becoming more powerful.

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Recently I started working with hair and maps and thinking about maps as a tool for colonial pursuits,

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but how else can we use the map as a symbol to question all that's wrong with geography?

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The Commission, as part of the Revealing the City's Past project, really appealed to me because it was an opportunity to come into a part of London that's very powerful but also has a very long history.

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We've seen all this direct action for statues and I think that's really powerful. Here

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there was a different kind of opportunity and I wanted to make sure that I could really make that work in as productive a way as direct action.

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It's challenging to work in this space.

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Right now.

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I'm being lit through windows.

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These windows contain the name of every Lord Mayor that's ever been here in the City of London, and I'm being looked at by Gog and Magog, which wouldn't mean anything to me before, but now through research, I know these are the old figures that represent London City.

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Churchill is staring at me here on the right.

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Of course, Cass is outside, Beckford is here, and the space is

very loaded with iconography and with statues to people who've had really problematic histories of owning slaves and accruing wealth through slavery.

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There are also monuments to the Boer War, which is a particularly bloody war. For me,

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this red room is full of blood.

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When I first came into this room, there was a banquet that was happening, and the floor was not visible because there's so many tables and so many people meeting and rushing to meet each other and to be part of an incredible banquet that's happening here.

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And that's what the room is really used for.

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So that's really invigorating way to meet this room for the first place.

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So the challenges of being here are really some of the weight of the history of this space.

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In all my research I felt there would be something that I could

find that would begin to open up the space as other than a space of exploitation or harvesting of people.

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And I found that actually one of the very oldest ceremonies that's held in London,

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it's been held here since 1211 and it's a ceremony of quit rents.

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Every year a tablecloth rather like this is lain out in a table in London and all the debts are piled up at the squares.

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It's almost pre money.

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The debts are paid with a blunt bill hook, a pile of nails, maybe some horseshoes.

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And when all the debts have seemed to be filled, the squares are filled and the debt is fair and square, it's been paid.

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The Quit Rents ceremony is not associated with slavery.

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But for this Commission, my concept is to take this remembrancer cloth and to use it to remind us of all the debts

that are not being paid, debts to the enslaved, debts to those who are in the clutches of modern day slavery and debts to nature.

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As a person who was born here in Britain, my Jamaican father served in the British Army and has fought in a military capacity for this country, I feel that I'm able to call for this kind of remembrance.

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My proposal was first to clothe the figures in this room who've forgotten those debts with this cloth.

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But then I thought what would be more powerful would be to put this to wear this cloth myself or my body, because I am my ancestors remembrance.

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And to wear the remembrancer cloth and to enter into this space would be powerful.

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But not just me, everybody who remembers or wants to remember the debts to the enslaved and to nature.

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Nine nights is a funerary practise in the Caribbean.

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In nine nights we could come together and try and find that new metric.

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What if we were all to wear the remembrancer cloth?

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What if we were all to enter the space and to use this space, which is used for banqueting and for lobbying, to lobby and create a new metric for social and environmental equity?

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Equitable measures are built into the fabric of this building,

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so there's a measure, the measure of the yard, of the, of the foot, of the metres in the walls here.

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London has always been a centre of international financial arbitration, but it's rapidly being overtaken.

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Places like Singapore are now taking on that mantle.

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I think now is a great time for London to take up this particular issue and the history here makes it would make it all the more powerful to do so.

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I feel that this cloth speaks to a kind of a pre-colonial sense of fair play that's in Britain.

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And I just want to remind the City of its of its own actual inheritance before some of the colonial atrocities.

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To bring people together here who speak for all those empty squares in terms of the environment and in terms of colonial history would be very powerful indeed and I think very worthwhile.