

ARTIST STATEMENT: DAVE LEWIS

In my father's place

Introduction My project considers a fiction that could have been had I grown up on the island of Grenada in the Caribbean – where my parents are originally from and now live – rather than London, UK. The title is based on a phrase that my father often uses in conversations with people when talking about the future, he points to me and says ‘..he is in my place’. The title is, in effect, a way to discuss broader ideas and possibilities of assuming an identity that is both foreign and alien and yet part of family history in some way.

Taking over from a retiring family member is a familiar trope – the passing on of responsibilities is fundamental to the idea of inheritance and customary practices through family lineage. My interest in developing this project is to expand on the idea of returning to a mythical ‘homeland’ of which little is known and figuring out what is to be done, in what way, and for what purpose. This acute lack of knowledge is shared by those returnees similar to me: born in America, Canada or Britain who look askance and bewildered by the land that surrounds them; by the broken English which they need to understand and learn; by the agricultural and tourist bases of an island economy that is vastly different from the economies they know.

The project's stimulus comes from conversations I have had with my peer group, that is, children born of Caribbean families who embody a duality of belonging and identity. They are ‘West-Indians’ taking on public rituals such as Carnival or private ones such as Nine Nights, removed from the country of origin and re-enacted in North America or the West. This concept of duality is most popularly known in America with hyphenated classification: Native-American; Chinese-American; Italian-American; Irish-American and so on. Being a child from the diaspora I understand that ‘home’ can be both England, and an island in the Caribbean. However, the hyphenated concepts used in American culture do not manifest themselves in Britain. I have never heard myself – or my peer group – referred to as a Caribbean-West-Indian-British. It is this complexity that foregrounded my photographic project ‘Postcards from Home’ and is in many ways continued by a current project about artists who work with and through ideas about the black diaspora in their creative work.

It is this gap between myself as the ‘Englishman’ – and familial ties to the Caribbean – which is involved in my attempts to achieve competency i.e. to be in my father's place. At the same time I am a reflexive figure who can reflect on the processes and internal desires required to successfully take over one's fathers place. It is the imaginings of being ‘the other’ from the position of ‘the self’ – although who is to say which is which – that I am interested in exploring. In terms of an anthropological perspective, I am both a descendent and an academic artist-researcher. Although in some way I possess a partial insider knowledge through my heritage, I am an outsider who grew up largely outside the Caribbean – there is a dissonance in being accepted, and in my own acceptance of the realities of life and living in my parents' place of birth. This is the space of liminality: the coming together of two (or more) different positions and perspectives changed and charged by influences to create a culturally-hybrid being and set of responses. I attempt a visual response in the series ‘How we live now’ by reflecting on different ways of being using the visual image as metaphor revealed in ordinary everyday surfaces and objects. The project will therefore explore the duality of someone who repeatedly visits in an attempt to become one with the community and the island, and at the same time continually look back towards Britain, a known place that has strong memories and associations both tragic and hopeful.

Biography

Dave Lewis was born in London in 1962. His early years were spent in London with the exception of a short period living on the Caribbean island of Grenada. After completing his degree in film and photography at the Polytechnic of Central London (now University of Westminster). He subsequently worked in a number of community photography project spaces teaching photography as self empowerment and as a campaign tool for social change.

Lewis was a member of the Black British arts movement featuring in the D'Max photographers nationwide touring exhibitions (1988). His early work around the black body and anthropology was exhibited at The Photographer's Gallery and MOMA, Oxford (1996). His work around the black figurine, 'In the Palm of my Hand' was featured in the Artist's Newsletter magazine and exhibited at Southwark Gallery (1997) and was subsequently one of the two opening exhibits of the Globe Gallery, Newcastle (1997).

His work around the Stephen Lawrence Report 'Chapter Six – Racism' (2001) has been shown and published extensively to date as has his visual anthropology exhibition 'Field Work' (2010). His portrait work has been shown at the National Gallery in the 'Seduced by Art' exhibition (2012); and has most recently exhibited at the 57th Venice Biennale as part of the Diaspora Pavilion with his photographic narrative 'Once Removed' (2017).

Lewis's work is in the Arts Council Collection, the Royal Anthropological Institute and Pitt Rivers Museum, Oxford. He currently lives and works in London teaching in the anthropology department at Goldsmiths University, college of London.

Artist Statement

My photographic practice is based on intensive research and uses constructed imagery to question ideas and theories around race and representation. The artworks – either still or moving image – create meaning for the viewer through depicting imaginative visual responses that aim to communicate a counter-position to the accepted and tacit 'knowledge'. At first sight they may seem tangential and light-hearted but their essence lies in the way they engage with the serious matters of life, perception and understanding in the twenty-first century.

My artworks deal with contemporary issues such as institutional racism, representation of the black body in the archives, identity and belonging, the cycle of migration and legacies of the Caribbean diaspora. They create a space in which the viewer can reflect upon their own positionality in relation to these themes; not only in terms of wider global narratives but also through personal and intimate memories.

Reversing my position as a London-based artist and creating works which look out towards the Caribbean, my intent is to create a series of lens-based images that establish a new position for speaking out from within the Caribbean. This rupture from a place I consider home, to 'another home', reveals a fundamental shift in my practice that is now confronted and challenged by a new environment with unaccustomed ways of being and understanding pushing my work in new directions.

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