

BLACK HISTORY

DIVERSITY X CREATIVITY IN MARGATE

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A decade ago, the census showed Margate as overwhelmingly white. Now the area is more diverse, but how well is its burgeoning art scene reflecting that? To mark Black History Month in October, we spoke to two local creatives to hear their take

VICTORIA
BARROW WILLIAMS

**Co-founder of People Dem Collective,
curator, creative producer**

“This year,” Victoria says, “we really want to interrogate where we’re at. Since the murder of George Floyd so many organisations have tried to tackle representation, but what has the legacy actually been? Have the initiatives worked, or have they just been box-ticking? There’s a lot to unpick.”

In order to do this, People Dem Collective is planning a programme of events during Black History Month (BHM), including a conference held in partnership with Creative Estuary. “Right now we’re collecting data from cultural institutions, spaces, and individuals,” says Victoria. “Then, in October, we’ll take a good hard look at our findings.”

In her own practice as a curator and creative producer, Victoria has recently

collaborated with artist Catherine Chinatree on a project celebrating the stories of Black women through their hair.

“I always prefer to explore Black identity through a lens of joy,” she explains. “Obviously, as a Black creative, your identity will impact your practice – but on the other hand, you don’t want to keep producing work that keeps you stuck in a trauma narrative.”

Joy is a word of which, perhaps, we don’t hear enough when it comes to the creative output of marginalised communities – and consequently it’s an energy which informs everything Victoria does. She is also particularly committed to engaging communities classically excluded from the art world.

“That’s my passion: creating ►

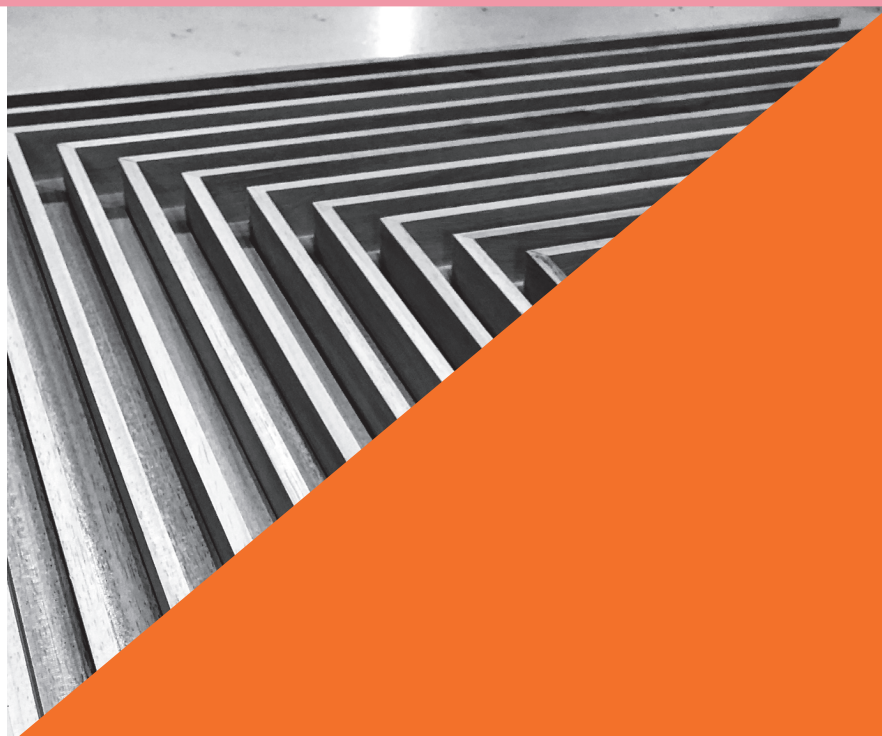




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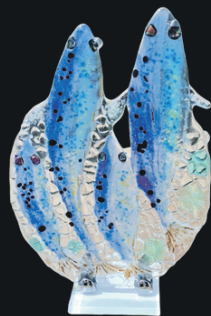
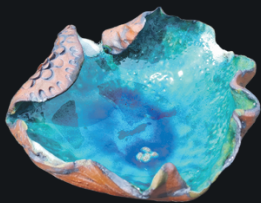
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different entry points to art, and allowing people to engage on their own terms," she says.

To those who haven't been given many opportunities to participate in culture, the idea that art can actually be fun can feel revelatory. "If someone says to me, 'I don't like art,' it's important to query that," she says. "Even the word 'art' is a barrier, when really, there's so much in our day-to-day life that is art."

"Art can be fashion," Victoria continues, "it can be music, screenprinting, creating a zine. It doesn't need to be only what's in galleries. It should feel like going to a theme park. You don't go to a theme park to examine the engineering. You just know it looks good, and feels good to be there. Things don't always have to be analysed - sometimes, that's just a way of shutting people out."

Supporting and developing artists,

she says, is not about "that one commission". It's about resilience. Along with artist Christine Peake, she's been looking towards nature, and taking inspiration from the ecological frameworks found there.

"It's about establishing a creative ecosystem - using nature as a guide as to how we treat our artists. Implementing the same respect and thoughtfulness. Sustainability in the art world is a huge issue: there can be this ethos of endless production and consumption... You have to keep coming up with new proposals, finding new funding. For people from marginalised communities it's an added pressure because of that expectation you use your *struggle* as fuel for your art."

She looks over to a potted bird of paradise in the corner of the room. "Take that plant," she says. "If you put it in that other corner, it'll have too much sun. But

"For people from marginalised communities it's an added pressure because of that expectation you use your *struggle* as fuel for your art"

move it over there, it won't have enough. The point is that nature *nurtures*. And it's important to me to emulate that.

"As people from marginalised communities, we can be a bit like plants you've got from Aldi: we've been left out, unwatered, for too long. We've been neglected. We're not in a good place. So, whenever a new artist takes that first step towards being there, showing up, it's a big deal. Together, we work on how they can inhabit that new space."

@victoriabarrowwilliams



GEOFFREY CHAMBERS

Multidisciplinary artist

“It’s a bit absurd,” Geoffrey muses. He is thinking about the philosophy behind BHM and whether, ultimately, it is a good thing or not.

“Having just this one section of the year devoted to us does feel slightly disingenuous,” he says. “You know: piecemeal, tokenistic. Just one month? Consider the influence of African history on world history, culture, religion and philosophy - as well as on the sciences, astronomy, architecture and medicine. *Every day* is Black people day!

“Many people don’t realise this, but historically, if you wanted to learn anything, you had to go to Africa. Plato, Aristotle, Herodotus and Hippocrates all studied in Africa. Monotheism is an African philosophy, and Islam would not be a major religion without the support of the Axumite Empire, which was as vast as Rome.”

That’s not to say BHM is wholly a bad thing, Geoffrey explains. Rather that we need to be mindful about how we engage with it.

“Sometimes initiatives like BHM can become warped - they end up propping up the underlying structures, enabling them to carry on as normal. Like the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, for example. Essentially, BLM is just a *second* on the clock of the anti-racism movement. It’s a hashtag. Think of our grandparents - they were out on the streets, catching seven kinds of hell in so many situations, resisting and protesting, even throwing bricks as the last ditch voice of the unheard. They wouldn’t even recognise the meme BLM as a form of resistance.”

When we speak, Geoffrey is busy preparing his contribution to *The World Reimagined*, a national art education project designed to transform how we understand the impact of transatlantic slavery. The project, spearheaded by Turner Prize nominee Yinka Shonibare CBE, brings together over a hundred artists, each of whom have been tasked with putting their own stamp on large, globe-shaped sculptures which will form part of several art trails taking place

across the country. At present, Geoffrey’s globe is upside down.

“Yes, it’s staying that way!” he laughs. “I wanted to make the familiar world literally unrecognisable. I’ve made the sea black and the land red, to help to disconnect us from our received histories. If you disorientate people just that little bit, it helps to open them up to receiving *new* stories.”

Like Victoria, Geoffrey believes it’s important not to limit our understanding of Black experience to trauma alone. “Joy is crucial, yes,” he says, “but there’s also Black *excellence*. Excellence doesn’t mean we forget the sadness: the sadness will always be there. But to me, reimagining the transatlantic meant looking through the eyes of our ancestors. To the fruition of their imagined freedom, their joy. To them, the world we live in now would be a shining, bright thing, filled with so much absolute wonder.”

For this reason, Geoffrey is covering much of his globe with chrome. “Black culture is *magnificent*. We’re so used to viewing Black people as prey, primitive or problematic, but actually, we’re the champions of culture. Without Black music, you don’t have Adele. You don’t have Amy Winehouse. You don’t have Harry Styles, Elvis, the Beatles or Nirvana, or Led Zeppelin. Without tango and salsa you don’t even have

most ballroom dancing - you wouldn’t have that movement in the hips!”

This is, perhaps, where BHM falls down: it highlights the crimes but not the triumphs, the pain but not the joy. And although education can be effective, says Geoffrey, “the teaching in schools can be one-dimensional. There aren’t enough teachers who grasp the absurdity of the single-track narrative, or the true cultural impact and broad scope of Black history.”

That is why he likes to engage people through creativity: “You can shout at people, and sometimes that’s necessary. But mostly all that does is make people unfeeling and defensive - which can elicit the response, ‘Oh, but I didn’t lynch anyone.’”

“We can be more convincing by sitting down and conversing. By eating together, by dancing together! Nobody likes to be talked-at. But they do like to be engaged-with. My hope with my art is that it gives people ‘chicken skin’ [goose bumps]. If you manage to move someone deeply on a shared feeling level, that’s the path to real connection.”

[@geoffreychambersartist](#)

Throughout October, People Dem Collective is running a series of events around Black History Month. Find more details at peopledemcollective.com