

Features

'I want to challenge people's perceptions'

ARTIST ELSA JAMES TELLS DARRYL WEBBER ABOUT HER WORK AND THE SUPER BLACK EXHIBITION SHE'S HELPED PUT TOGETHER IN ESSEX

Elsa James' *Forgotten Black Essex* from her recent exhibition at Firstsite. *Super Black* starts this Friday

AMAAL SAID

ELSA James is excited but she admits "the pressure is on" as she gears up for a major new exhibition at Firstsite that opens this Friday. But first of all she has to find the right place in her flat to get a decent phone signal so she can tell me all about it.

Generously setting aside time to talk about Super Black, which runs from Friday through to January 12, Elsa's enthusiasm and passion is evident as she talks about her work and the Firstsite show which aims to tell stories that haven't been told before - that of the experience of black people in the UK and in Essex.

Super Black is the follow-up exhibition to Black Girl Essex, Elsa's show at Firstsite over the summer which included three of her films about black identity in the county. This new exhibition includes two new films from Elsa as well as work from other artists which explore complex questions of black experience in the UK.

Elsa hails from West London originally but has lived in Essex for 20 years after moving to Thurrock in 1999 and settling in Southend more recently.

She says she regards herself as an Essex girl now and her children have

grown up in the county which has given her a unique insight into the county and her relationship to it. This major show at Firstsite is the culmination of many years of work and research by Elsa which informs her pieces - alongside the fact that she has lived in Essex for some time.

She always wanted to be an artist and wanted to go to art college but says her Trinidadian mum told her she should learn a trade instead. She worked in recruitment in the City, at House of Fraser at Lakeside, tried modelling, singing, cleaning and even managed a pirate radio station but always hoped to become an artist one day. She eventually fulfilled her dream and went to Chelsea College Of Arts in 2006 and graduated in 2010. Elsa says as soon as she got there she says she knew "this is where I want to be."

After graduating, and armed with plenty of ideas and a wealth of life experiences, Elsa set off on her artistic adventure with the aim of working with communities who often get ignored by the art world.

"Access to art is important. I really like to get people and communities into art. The art world is still quite elite and often just pays lip service to ideas of equality and diversity. My thing is to involve people, work with

communities and find out about their lives."

Her work at Firstsite taps into those communities and finds out what their thoughts and feelings are.

"This project involves people from Essex's black communities and it came out of discussions with other black folk in Essex. I wanted to do a project about women who came to Essex pre-Windrush, about black presence in Essex."

"Before I started this, I had no idea there were black Romans in Britain or black Tudors. We all know about the Windrush generation and we tend to think that's the start of multiculturalism in the UK but it was happening long before that. We were never taught that in school."

With those ideas in place, Elsa got funding for two pieces about black presence in Essex pre-Windrush which will be films shown as part of the Super Black exhibition.

In her research, two stories in particular caught Elsa's imagination. One was from the 18th century and followed the life of Hester Woodley who came from St Kitts in 1741 to be a domestic servant (in other words a slave) at a new mansion at Little Parndon near modern-day Harlow. She spent the rest of her life there, dying at the age of 62 and getting a

headstone in the graveyard of St Mary's church, a rare thing for a black servant and a sign of the esteem in which she was held.

The second story is about a beauty contest held at the Kursaal, Southend, 1908, which came to national attention when a young black woman wanted to enter the event but was told she couldn't. There followed a debate involving the mayor about whether she should be eligible to take part.

"I retell the story and look at how people respond," says Elsa. "She's so witty, the way she talks to reporters about her experience. I tried to imagine what life was like for her"

An extra dimension to her work and perspective on being a black woman in the county is the 'Essex Girl' stereotype. Elsa is part of the Essex Girl Liberation Front which fights the negative cliches and also gives her an insight into how people think about Essex.

"We have T-shirts which say 'This is what an Essex girl looks like.' I want to challenge people's perceptions. I was wearing that T-shirt to a festival in London and I had a light-bulb moment. I thought 'I've been an Essex girl for 20 years, I'm going to embrace it and champion this.'"

Elsa wanted to find out what black

people who weren't from Essex thought about the stereotypes and what it's like to grow up in the county.

"I wanted to come at it from that angle, I wanted to know what other black people think.

"My nephew, who lives in London, told my daughter that his white girlfriend is 'blacker' than her. He said Essex was diluting her blackness, and that helped with the ideas for the Super Black exhibition.

"I wanted to ask black people how the Essex girl stereotype resonated with them too.

"I've been here in Essex all my adult life, all my artistic life. There are a lot of stereotypes about Essex and we need to challenge those perceptions."

So there's plenty to grapple with in Elsa's work, intellectually as well as visually, but it's all done with style and humour. She's really proud to be part of the Super Black exhibition having helped curate it as well as making pieces for it.

"I think it's a really important exhibition that asks what it's like to be black in Essex today."

■ Super Black is at Firstsite, Colchester, from tomorrow (Friday, October 11) until January 12.