

Exhibitions

Elsa James: Othered in a region that has been historically Othered

Focal Point Gallery, Southend-on-Sea
26 June to 18 September

Central to Elsa James's first solo exhibition is a major film work presented across three screens. Titled *Othered in a region that has been historically Othered*, 2022, and therefore lending its name to the exhibition, the screens reflect the division of the film into three chapters. Only one screen plays at a given moment, thereby encouraging the viewer to follow the narrative as they move from screen to screen in the gallery space. All the chapters present a woman – James herself – alone in a specific Essex location. The first chapter, 'Contemporary Echoes of the Subjugation of Women in Essex', features James walking through woodland, dressed in pale-blue garb, towards Old Knobbly, a distinctive 800-year-old tree in Mistley. Location matters here as Mistley was the base for the notorious witchfinder general, Matthew Hopkins. Referencing John Akomfrah's proposal that 'in the fictive, one has the possibility of a re-inscription', James connects the brutal persecution of women as witches during the English Civil War with the historical existence of black women in the country.

Chapter two, 'A Jab Jab Awakening Towards a New Essex', shifts time and place: Dedham Vale in the present. James, covered in olive oil mixed with black pigment, dances frenetically in so-called Constable Country. 'Jab Jab' indexes a carnivalesque gesture in which formerly enslaved communities satirically restaged scenes from their bondage and mocked the festivities enjoyed by the colonial upper classes. Finally, 'An Afrofuture Narrative for Essex' takes the viewer beneath the M25 at Thurrock in the future. Clothed in gold, its protagonist stares down the camera with determination and steely confidence. An insistent voice-over envisages Essex accepting racial difference rather than denigrating it. In this way, a future differing irrevocably from the trauma enveloping past and present is conceived.

Although occupying the centre of each film, it would be incorrect to apprehend James as identifying with an



Elsa James, *Chapter Two: A Jab Jab Awakening Towards a New Essex*, 2022, video

aesthetics of narcissism in which the performer posits with absoluteness their sheer primacy and corporeal immediacy. If James stands alone, it's because the camera's mechanical gaze isolates her. Singled out, James's energetic movements in the second and third chapters resist the objectifying mechanism of the lens and reassert agency; the image loses focus, unable to grasp its subject. During the third chapter, her costume transforms into a constellation of golden stars as if body and place merge together.

James, moreover, stands here in the way that any of us could, or should, do: as an empathic medium through which the life experience of others is registered and acknowledged. She reminds us that anterior to selfhood is intersubjectivity and, just maybe, a community defined through complex processes of identification rather than through the assertion of definite identity: a 'we' integral to 'I'. Yet it's also worth taking a further step since community generally implies the coexistence of subjects at a specific moment. Among the strengths of James's enterprise is its deployment of the 'anachronic', a concept utilised by Alexander Nagel and Christopher Wood in their study of how Renaissance Art and material culture can scramble past, present and future, thereby invalidating linear models of time so common to historiography. The film evinces a similar anachronic sensibility, interweaving different temporal coordinates: the past seen from the present, historical forms reactivated in the present, and the future as dreamed by the present. Historical and geographical location conjoins with dislocation.

Throughout the exhibition, then, there is a complex historical consciousness at work. Historicity is a factor of *The Journey*, 2022, a 'sound memory' haunted by

Elmia Castle in Ghana, one of the most important stations in the transatlantic slave trade. Meanwhile, *The Black Interior*, 2022, archives everyday acts of racism collected from four anonymous black men. Consisting of black text upon black background, the challenge of reading each document testifies that empathy must be laboured for. Of course, those routinely facing racist microaggressions will have few struggles in reading these pieces. Just glimpsing some of the phrases will easily dovetail with their own lived experience. Such labour, though, demonstrates how empathy is a product of agency as opposed to the passive adoption of another's viewpoint.

As the concept of Afrofuturism already signals, 'chronopolitics' – or 'anachronopolitics' – can be vital for thinking about the legacy of black subjectivities and representations, both within Essex and further afield. Torture of women, transatlantic slavery, contemporary racism – there's horror aplenty here. Yet, as the film suggests, by documenting these horrors, the bright future we inscribe as fiction can become actuality. James's exhibition compellingly suggests ways in which the past's refusal to stay past will be central for that future.

Matthew Bowman lectures at the University of Suffolk and Bath Spa University.

Brent Biennial: In the House of my Love

various venues, London, 8 July to 11 September

The second edition of the Brent Biennial, 'In the House of my Love', takes as its point of departure the universal quest to find a place in the world. In doing so, the Biennial focuses on 'unbelonging' in the UK: 2022 marks ten years since the implementation of the Hostile Environment, the generally nasty political stance towards migrants which includes, but is not limited to, the co-option of organisations and the public as de facto immigration officers by incentivising people 'to tell on' their neighbours. In response, the Biennial gives form to ideas of homemaking in Brent with a large focus on queer experience, a borough characterised by its density of migrants and (relatively) decentralised residential geography, as well as pocketed arts spaces and locations, most easily accessed on foot or by bicycle. The invited artists – many of whom live in the borough – share their personal struggles with the UK's harsh migration policy, forging connections that foster kinship as a methodology.

Ecclesiastical buildings are the locale for two atmospheric and impactful works. Shenece Oretha's *In Counter Harmony* occupies the Tin Tabernacle, a mid-19th century church made out of corrugated iron in Kilburn (later repurposed by the Sea Cadets in 1949 and in 2012 as the site for Lindsay Seer's installation *Nowhere Less Now*, see Reviews AM360). This new sound installation reflects on the nature of communal spaces by featuring spectral voices of those who typically use such spaces, such as choirs, youth groups and adult classes. As listeners are swathed in a purple glow, audio from these communities overlap and echo in the hushed space, metaphorically and sonically harmonising voices from different contexts. The work is a reminder of the importance that these typically rundown spaces hold as places of connection.

This dark shapeshifting house of prayer stands physically in stark contrast to the solidity of St Matthew's Church in Harlesden. Katarzyna Perlak's pajaki sculptures (meaning 'spider' in Polish) resemble paper chandeliers – or 'queer talismans', as the artist refers to them. The works hang in charming defiance as if reclaiming a space that still largely excludes queer people. Made up of kitschy knick-knacks and trinkets, including embroidered tablecloths, keyrings, straw pom-poms, ornamental cats, enamel badges and beading, they subversively assimilate the gaudiness of religious effigies.

Alex Baczynski-Jenkins's meandering pseudo-documentary *You are a guest now*, which is installed under a railway arch in Kilburn, follows the life of four queer friends who live in Poland. As a snapshot of their lives, they muse on their relationships, families, sexualities and haircuts as they wander around natural areas, sit in their apartments and perform drag and poetry. In one memorable scene, the group attends a heavily policed Pride march and are heckled with visceral hate speech and violent threats, one character donning a papier-mâché hat made from right-wing and homophobic newspaper clippings in protest. Without a strict narrative impulse, it is nevertheless affecting to witness how queer lives continue to provide space for themselves, forced into confronting those who oppose them.

Sarah Rose's multi-channel sound installation *An Open Letter of Many Replies* occupies a shed by Roundwood Park's disused bowling green. Sensuous and intimate, Rose's letters are in response to writer Rachel Carson and her lover Dorothy Freeman's correspondence and employ the moth as a symbol of migration – we hear lines such as: 'Flying wherever it might like, the moth's wings beat freely to the moon's orchestrations whilst evading predation and scrutiny'. Arwa Aburawa & Turab Shah's moving-image work *I Carry It With Me Everywhere* at Design Works in Kilburn looks at homesickness and the effect of bearing the loss of one's homeland, while Mahmoud Khalid's installation and video work *Proposal for a House Museum of an Unknown Crying Man* imagines the home of a queer man forced to live in exile and making reparations for past traumas.

Zinzi Minott's video and sound installation *Fi Dem I-V* (Profile p16) powerfully draws on the history of the Windrush and the residual racism directed towards African lives and the black diaspora. The five-channel video with a pounding soundtrack is presented in the darkened room of Harlesden's Newman Catholic College and effectively captures the disorientation of enforced migration, leaving viewers with their own sense of



Lynette Kamala, *Ditsya Dancehall*, 2022, installation view

Chimera Nashashibi/Skaer

Exhibition: 30 September — 10 December 2022
Preview & In-conversation: 29 September 5.30–7.30pm

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