

Reclaiming Essex

More than 30 years after the cultural stereotypes of 'Essex Man' and 'Essex Girl' were coined, artists Michael Landy and Elsa James meet in Southend to discuss what the terms mean to them. Interview by *Helen Sumpter*. Portrait by *Julian Anderson*



Born in 1963, Michael Landy came to prominence in the early 1990s as one of the so-named YBA (Young British Artist) generation. His work, across drawing, sculpture and large-scale installation, includes a broad interrogation of Britain's social and political climate, and how and on what we place value. His works include *Break Down* (2001), for which he publically destroyed everything he owned, and *Semi-detached* (2004), an installation focused on his father, left unable to work as a result of an industrial accident, and which included a full-scale replica of his parents' Essex house. He lives in London.

Born in 1968, Elsa James worked in a range of industries before studying Fine Art at Chelsea College of Arts, in 2006, and Goldsmiths, University of London, in 2013. She works across performance, film (in which she also performs), text and socially and politically engaged practice, exploring stories and archives to highlight experiences of race, gender, diaspora and belonging, in particular in relation to her experience of living in Essex. Recent short films include two works under the title *Forgotten Black Essex* (2018), and *Black Girl Essex: Here We Come, Look We Here* (2019). She lives in Southend.

Helen Sumpter: You've both been making work independently that explores aspects of the Essex cultural stereotype. Michael, you are working on an upcoming exhibition at Firstsite in Colchester called 'Michael Landy's Welcome to Essex'. Elsa, part of your work is about exploring your own and others' experience as a 'Black Essex Girl'. Michael, your walk with Elsa along the Southend sea front will also feature in your exhibition. How did you both end up focusing on Essex as a subject?

Elsa James: For me, it was almost by accident. I grew up in West London but moved to Chafford Hundred in Thurrock in Essex in 1999. We had one daughter at the time, and it was an opportunity to get on the property ladder. One of the reasons for later moving to Southend was because there were good schools and, as I also discovered, good arts organisations, such as Metal and Focal Point Gallery, where I'm having a solo exhibition next year. At an International Women's Day event in 2017 I'd been having a discussion with my friend Syd Moore about unpacking the 'Essex Girl' stereotype. When it became apparent, during a panel, that women from Zimbabwe, Congo and South Africa all knew about this stereotype, Syd said, 'I'm going to start the Essex Girl Liberation Front' (EGLF), and of course I joined. I'd made two short films under the title *Forgotten Black Essex*, which honoured two black women who had passed through Essex – one from Senegal, called Princess Dinubolu, who had entered a beauty pageant in Southend in 1908, and the other about an enslaved woman named Hester Woodley, who was brought to Harlow from the Caribbean. I had been ashamed to tell Black folks in London that I lived in Essex, but as part of the EGLF I was wearing a T-shirt with 'This is what an Essex Girl looks like' on it. I realised that I needed to unpack all of this some more, so I coined the term 'Black Girl Essex' to feel comfortable in doing that.

Michael Landy: I was brought up in Ilford, which was then in Essex, before it became part of Greater London. My interest in the Essex stereotype goes back to the 1980s and 1990s when the markets opened up economically and young, predominantly working-class men would go to work in the City and make a lot of money, and how that wealth and consumption became a really conspicuous thing. I left school in 1979, as Margaret Thatcher took power, and witnessed what felt like a big sea change in the country. The journalist and historian Simon Heffer first coined the phrase 'Essex Man' in 1990 as someone who doesn't like foreigners, doesn't like books, doesn't like culture, doesn't like paying much tax, but he owns his own council house and he's interested in making money. He also doesn't like being told what to do, and both Labour and the Conservatives are a bit scared of him. The Tory author and broadcaster James Wentworth Day (born in 1899) wrote about Essex as being the rubbish dump of London, as they used to bury London's rubbish in landfills along the estuary. Essex has continued to be viewed as a rubbish dump, but in a different way, related to class and social aspiration, which is really a demonisation. I had the opportunity to ask Simon Heffer about the stereotype, and he told me it was based on this chap he saw on a train coming into London's Liverpool Street Station, talking really loudly on his brick-sized phone. It was just a stereotype, and, of course, once Essex Man had been created, then so could Essex Girl.

EJ: Yes, it came not long after. Growing up in West London I just knew about the Essex Girl – blonde hair, white stiletto shoes, freely dancing around her handbag – but I didn't know it actually existed in the dictionary until I was living here. What it says is 'a working-class woman, devoid of taste, sexually promiscuous, unintelligent and materialistic'. Essex Man is progressive and, like you say, Michael, both the Tories and Labour are a bit fearful of him because he does what he wants, and Essex Girl also does what she wants. Although the stereotype can be traced directly back to Simon Heffer, something of that already existed.

ML: Yes, in the 1980s there was already this idea about Essex people, and there's the longstanding connection between the East End of London and Essex, partly because it's easy to get to from London. North Essex and south Essex are very different as well. North Essex is much more agricultural with picturesque villages, but I think *Country Life* still once gave Essex zero out of 10 for the quality of its landscape.

EJ: There's definitely that divide. It's those different stories I'm interested in looking at, because, for me, prefixing Essex with 'Black' takes me on whole other journeys. In 2019 I made a film about Black voices in Essex called *Black Girl Essex: Here We Come, Look We Here*, which is filmed in Tilbury Docks in Essex, where the *Empire Windrush* landed in 1948. Symbolically, the rise of multicultural Britain started in Essex and, of course, some of those first Caribbean people stayed there. I've spoken to nurses who came from Jamaica, Trinidad, Antigua, and they went straight into Colchester General Hospital. London is often seen as the cultural capital of

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Michael Landy



Above: Harry Enfield in character as 'Loadsamoney', 1987-88; facing page: Michael Landy, *Semi-detached*, Duveen Galleries, Tate Britain, London, 2004, installation view





Elsa James, *Black Girl Essex: Here We Come, Look We Here*, 2019, Tilbury Docks, Essex (film still)



Blackness, but then what is Essex? Michael, you talked about Essex being this ugly zero, which goes back to Victorian times. Kent is 'the garden of England' and Essex is this dumping ground.

ML: Kent is the garden and Essex has been described as the patio, or the armpit of Britain. As you say, it's been going on for years. For me, the walks I'm taking with different Essex people as part of the exhibition are my way of looking at a different Essex. One of the people I'm walking with is Gillian Darley, who has a largely positive view and who's written a book called *Excellent Essex*. Another is social historian Ken Worpole, who's contributed to a book about some of the more anarchic people who've lived in Essex, called *Radical Essex*. Another interesting object for me is the Dagenham Idol, a wooden figurine dug up in the 1920s on the site of the Ford car works in Dagenham [now held at Valence House Museum in Dagenham], and thought to be one of the earliest representations of a human figure. That will also be featured in the exhibition, and the work that comes out of the walks will be shown on the long curved wall at Firstsite.

EJ: The whole idea of walking is interesting to me because I don't know if you've heard this other stereotype – that Black people don't like walking? There was even a play, called *Black Men Walking* [written by the rapper Testament, about a Black men's walking group in Sheffield]. There's this perception that Black people are only seen in an urban landscape. This is a conversation that I've had with my husband. He loves walking – and this is quite heavy, and will feed into my work next year – but as a big, tall guy, he often doesn't feel comfortable out walking on his own because of always having to be aware that other people might perceive him as dangerous or threatening. Walking brings up so many other layers of what it means to walk dependent on the colour of your skin or your gender, as well. I think my walk with you, though, Michael, will be a nice walk along the seafront because I feel privileged that I can step out of my front door in Southend and do that. Pre-Covid, I was also thinking of doing some work in tanning salons, because there are so many in Essex, and, essentially, these are places where white skin goes to become brown and lips are plumped up. Growing up in the 1970s I was ridiculed and called 'rubber lips', so there's a lot to unpack in that as well, because it's such a flip.

ML: In many ways, the 1970s were a horrible, toxic time. For me, it was an interest in the fact that Essex is very Tory, and I noticed that there are all these forts along the estuary, put there at different times to keep different foreigners out, and then when Brexit came, the whole of Essex voted to leave. So, there is this history associated with keeping people out, as well as of bringing ideas and people in – as you say, with *Windrush* at Tilbury. Why is Essex Man suddenly so scared of Europe – that interests me as well: why close down, why not open up? All of that will be in the *Essexism: An Archive* I'm creating for the exhibition, which will include books,



magazines, newspaper clippings, TV characters like Harry Enfield's 'Loadsamoney' and some documentary footage, including people talking about leaving the East End because there were 'too many brown faces', and coming to Essex. Again, that's about demonisation; the material almost repeats itself.

I'm also interested in the independent spirit of people from Essex, like the plotlanders, who saw Essex, among other places, as an opportunity to own their own bit of England and make a better life for themselves. Before the Second World War they left a very polluted East End and at weekends and holidays would build these makeshift houses on small plots of land not needed for agriculture. There's something really admirable about that, like a frontier.

EJ: That's reminding me of my parents' generation, coming to Britain, setting up somewhere new and exciting. The other day, because all my family is still in West London, my mum was saying to my sister, 'Why does Elsa live so far?' And my sister said to her: 'Hang on a minute, when you were 21, in the early 1960s, you left the whole Caribbean to come to England.' She hadn't thought of it in that way.

ML: My parents also came to this country to make better lives for themselves, from Ireland, in the late 1950s. At some point they decided to move to Ilford, partly because there was an Irish community there. It's not the same thing at all, but there were also hostilities towards Irish people in the 1970s, but much more so if you were Black. But we lived in quite a tight-knit Irish community. When my dad had his serious industrial accident, I remember the whole community gave us money and bought us a washing machine. It was a real community of people that would look after each other.

That message has come out again since Covid.

People have said that Thatcherism not only brought in free markets and materialism but that in 1979 we also stopped being a kindly society as well. It's that rampant materialism and individualism that, over the years, I've been interested in through my work, in different forms, including *Break Down* (marking its 20th anniversary in 2021). I only found out relatively recently that the material from *Break Down* that wasn't incinerated, ended up in Essex, at what was Mucking Landfill [now Thurrock Thameside nature reserve]. When you look at my exhibition it may seem like a negative portrait of Essex but I'm only holding a mirror up to how other people have portrayed it over the last 40 years.

- 'Michael Landy's Welcome to Essex', Firstsite, Colchester, 26 June to 5 September. firstsite.uk, free to all, 10% off in shop with National Art Pass. Please check website for the latest information and booking details
- The book *Intersections in the Art of Elsa James*, by Jon Blackwood, published by Firstsite, will be launched at the Estuary Festival in June, estuaryfestival.com. For more on James' work visit elsajames.com

'I'd been ashamed to tell Black folks in London I lived in Essex, but then I started wearing a T-shirt that had "This is what an Essex Girl looks like" on it' *Elsa James*



Left: unknown maker, Dagenham Idol, 2459-2110BC; facing page: Elsa James, *Forgotten Black Essex: Hester and Hester Woodley*, 2018 (film still)