

JHAF 2021: In conversation with our 'decanon' panellists

Could you give us a brief overview of your current work?

GAYLE: At the core of my practice is a methodology of 'imaginal travel' in which I connect and move through objects, contexts, people, places, and historical sources, which also move through me. I work with photography, collage, mise-en-scene landscapes, ritual and sensory experiences, propositions, and pieces worn on the body. My process has evolved as I have begun to understand that not being confined to singular spaces nor gallery-settings, and not having necessarily any object-based outcomes at all, can be a way to move art away from the artist as producer of an object to an experience, both inner and shared, by the participant(s). I am currently Artist in Residence in Photography at the V&A, I am developing a project with Ca' Foscari University in Venice as recipient of the 2019 Sustainable Art Prize, and I am completing my PhD in Fine Art at the Royal College of Art.

ALIA: I am a visual artist and like to experiment with different mediums but my work often focuses on photography, especially fashion and portraiture. The concepts in my work explore my experiences as an LGBTQ+ South Asian mixed-race person and I love to use colour to tell stories.

HARRIET: Since 2018, I have been Curator of the New Hall Art Collection, a contemporary art collection with over 500 art works by women artists. The Collection is displayed across Murray Edwards College, designed by the architects Chamberlin, Powell and Bon as a manifesto for the education of women. The Collection has a remarkable history which begins with the donation of a work by the leading American artist Mary Kelly, from 1986. It has grown considerably since then and includes works by international artists such as Lubaina Himid, Paula Rego and Gayle Chong Kwan among many others.

I work in a very small team so my work touches on both the micro and macro. Some days I might be clearing the leaves off the Barbara Hepworth sculpture in the garden, while on others I will be developing a new partnership with an arts organisation. I am keen for the Collection to be better known and for the works of women artists to be given the attention they deserve. The Collection is eclectic so I try to reflect on the relationship between the work of art and its broader context.

ANASTASIA: I am a third year undergraduate studying history of art at the University of Cambridge. Last year, on the request of collection curator Harriet Loffler, I undertook research into the representation of BME artists in the collection, determining that only approximately 5% of the artists at New Hall are from BME backgrounds. I am also a member of the Decolonise History of Art student-led working group.

Can you tell us about a time when you've run up against the western canon of art and how its impacted you?

GAYLE: I am currently involved with a group of artists in a 're-visioning' of a major cultural organisation, which is a painful and difficult process for those involved – the canon and funding structures protect and distort organisations from really confronting systematic racism and inequality and making concrete changes.

ALIA: I sometimes get the occasional comment that my work is too 'niche' - it's probably because western art has always been viewed as the mainstream and the industry has a long way to go to change this perception.

HARRIET: When I studied Art History at undergraduate level very few women artists were taught on my course. It was only later, during my Master's degree at the Royal College of Art – particularly in the classes of Jean Fisher – that feminist, queer and postcolonial perspectives entered the discussion.

I think we need to clarify what we mean by the canon. The one which was taught while I was at University is androcentric and exclusive. However, the New Hall Art Collection offers a counter approach: it is populated by women artists, some of whom are well-known but many of whom are not – artists whose careers have been varied and circuitous. While it is always tempting to try and tell a grand, monolithic narrative – the 'History of Art' – the New Hall Art Collection does not (and should not) conform to this kind of historical straightjacketing. I am aware, however, that a Collection exclusively with artists who identify as women creates a grouping that does not include everyone on the gender spectrum.

ANASTASIA: I think the first time I came across the canon palpably, and it also helped make me aware of just how artificial and exclusionary it is, was in my first year of university. The first year course was a broad sweep of Eurocentric, white, male, and heteronormative art. We even had a global art week (it has now been removed, largely because of campaigning by the Decolonise History of Art group), which pigeon-holed most of the non-Western art covered in the course into one week of teaching. I think this experience made me realise just how strong the reign of the canon is and how important it is to tackle it. I joined the Decon HoA group, for example, and started being more critical and vocal about these issues.

Why do you think this discussion is an important one?

GAYLE: It is so important to keep discussing, pushing against, and trying to break up the 'canon', as it is still very much there as a means of marginalising different types of

practice, particularly as mine is so multi-disciplinary, and 'othering' cultural and gender perspectives and lived experience.

ALIA: It is so important for the art world to make space and champion different types of artists and art. It gives people role models and highlights diverse stories. As a little kid dreaming of being an artist someday, it may have allowed me to believe in myself a little bit more!

HARRIET: It is a vital discussion and one that fosters a questioning about our established systems of knowledge and production that, I hope, can inform our everyday working practices.

ANASTASIA: The canon constructs a view of art and art history that privileges Euro-US, white, cis male, heterosexual art and interests, excluding and distorting everyone and every aspect of culture that does not fit into that really narrow category. A canon helps to maintain a neocolonial relationship between the world and art and art history, and works to sustain racism, classism and heterosexism. Discussing it, talking about its fallacy, its oppressive nature and the values behind it, is part of the efforts to debunk it altogether, and foster a more inclusive and multifaceted view of art and its history that platforms and celebrates different cultures and cultural producers.