

OpenLearn mini documentary

Art is about Transformation

Helen Cammock:

I'm really interested in what I think of as history, so I never think of it as singular. I never think of it as linear. It's something that's cyclical. It's something that's multiple. And the idea is if we don't understand the multiple in terms of histories, we will never get the complete picture. And we are in a situation then where narrative stories and experiences are erased.

I made a piece of quite an early piece of work called *The Singing Will Never Be Done* in which I read a section of the rivers of blood speech by Enoch Powell. It's, Enoch Powell was a right-wing politician who made this speech in 1968 which is about the repatriation of anyone he believed was an immigrant in the UK at that time.

It is like watching a nation busily engaged in heaping up its own funeral pyre. So insane are we that we actually permit unmarried persons to immigrate for the purpose of founding a family with spouses and fiancés whom they have never seen.

Now he famously made this speech at a moment where in Wolverhampton where, there is a historical link to it my father was teaching in Wolverhampton at the time and he was on a he was on a board looking at race relations as they called it at that time in Wolverhampton. So, it was a moment where I was even as a very small child. I became more and more aware of politics.

Now my speaking of the rivers of blood speech as a black woman is not the same in terms of meaning as Enoch Powell a white right wing, I would say fascist, politician in in the kind of late 60s.

[SINGING]

One of the things that I'm really interested in is this idea of the audible fingerprint and how we can say things whether or not they're our words or other people's words. But our delivery of those words shifts and changes meaning based on who we are and what our experiences are.

And in your family, you were a gentle joke. Uncle Tom, conformist, a white black man, little goody goody. Negroes are savages, brutes, illiterate, but in my own case I knew that these statements were false.

When I first started to make work, I used myself and I used my family and we were this conduit for kind of conversations about many things really but about race and about kind of the politics of race in the UK. But what I realized was actually stories translate so I made a film called Changing Room. That was that is essentially it's about a relationship a conversation between an imagined conversation between myself and my father.

Because for me in that moment you are not the boy aged eight or the soldier aged 18 or the man with so much achieved. You're my father.

And I made this film and I showed it in a in a group show in London and somebody a woman came up to me at the end and she said you know what Helen. I have to tell you that that film was amazing. I feel really moved by it. I'm not black I'm white. But what I took from that was about an imagined conversation with my father. Everything that you said was all about the things that my father had struggled with his whole life.

This idea of barriers not being able to do what he really wanted to do. And at that moment I realized that I didn't have to start saying oh yes I make work about race or I make work about this or I make, because people will take what they want to take what they need to take from work, they will relate and identify with what they want to and what they need to identify with.

What I want to do with art is have conversations that might effect some change. Art is about transformation. And so, in order to try to effect change I think that the transformation that I try to develop leaves and allow space for people to find their way in with it.

We have a responsibility to each other I think to understand who we are and what our stake in life is I suppose. Much of the work Much of the many of the conversations I have are about this idea of the collective and so of course I do have a sense of responsibility and that extends to my life as an artist as well.