

Othered in a region that has been historically Othered

Elsa James

26th June to
18th September 2022



Focal Point Gallery is pleased to announce the first major solo exhibition by British African-Caribbean artist, producer and activist Elsa James. Her most ambitious work to date, 'Othered in a region that has been historically Othered', premieres in her home of Southend and is part of her ongoing enquiry into what it means to be black in Essex. The exhibition includes a major three-part film installation and original sound works, alongside a new series of prints. These are centred around James' lived experience, combining historical and speculative narratives, the untold stories of current residents and extensive research.

James' recent works investigate recovery, recollection, and the archives, to examine ideas surrounding regionality of race and black subjectivity. Earlier films *Forgotten Black Essex* (2018) and *Black Girl Essex* (2019) forged new understandings of blackness viewed through a contemporary Essex lens by exploring little known histories and current accounts of residents in England's most misunderstood county. The historical oppression that James' research reveals is emblematic of her own experience and provides the basis of an ambitious new film work that spans vast timelines, eventually propelling viewers to a radical Afrofuture vision for Essex.

In three chapters, this new film moves from a reimagining of the persecution of women as witches or essentially 'other' in the mid-17th century by the infamous Witchfinder General, Matthew Hopkins, to a future alternative Essex where recovery has been achieved, via a 'Jab Jab' performance that acts as a gift and transformative moment. As a form of speculative fiction and with evocative use of sound and moving image, the film installation signals a major departure in James' practice.

To realise this large-scale work, James is working with several specialist collaborators, including sound composer and designer Trevor Mathison (Black Audio Film Collective), music composer Paul Gladstone-Reid MBE, award-winning film director Andy Delaney, movement director and choreographer Lea Orož, carnival costume specialist Symone Williams and professional drummers Ken Lawrence and Niles Hailstones.

To inform these works, James has also worked closely with several groups in Essex including individuals from the Black

Student Societies at University of Essex, the South Essex LGBTQIA+ community and members of Communities and Sanctuary Seekers Together (CAST), a Southend-based charity supporting the self-determined needs of asylum seekers and refugees.

A new sound work evokes the experience of enslaved African people forced to walk through the long passage and pass through 'the door of no return' to board the ships that would take them across the Atlantic on the treacherous journey known as the 'Middle Passage'. Visitors will pass from one gallery to the next whilst listening to a soundtrack of crashing waves and sound that evokes the forced displacement of black people and identity under the transatlantic slave trade.

A new iteration of screen-prints from 'The Blackness Series', an ongoing series of text-based works rendered in black font on black in a darkened room, challenges the viewer by being intentionally arduous to read, serving as a reminder about who is visible and who is invisible in society. The prints document personal lived experience, specifically the black male experience, which will also be evoked by an accompanying sound piece.

A new large-scale neon work, *I AM HERE BECAUSE YOU WERE THERE*, quotes the words of David Lammy MP from a speech he made in 2018 responding to the Windrush Scandal. The one-and-a-half-minute recorded speech is included in the Big Screen Southend programme.

The activist impulse that underpins James' work acknowledges the untold histories of Essex and seeks to encourage audiences to reconsider perceptions and widespread narratives about the county, by reflecting upon their own subjectivity and performed identity. This new body of work encourages the potential for the recognition and support of other black residents, creating a set of principles or resources that demarcate black space within the collective mindset and narratives held about Essex and its people. Whilst her work deliberately starts from the specifics of individual, place-based experience, the themes, and experiences James is articulating speak to a wider collective, understanding across the UK, and globally.

Interview between writer and curator Ekow Eshun (EE) and Elsa James (EJ) 31st May 2022

EE

I want to start by thinking about your new project 'Othered in a region that has been historically Othered.' I'm interested in the ways in the film, you are simultaneously looking back and looking forward at the same time. Why the urge to do both of those things?

EJ

The looking back is about being in this county, being in Essex, as I think living in this county is loaded. I have a friend who's a writer and when she introduces herself at talks in London and says 'I'm from Essex' people laugh. The writer, Tim Burrows, says everytime the word Essex is mentioned, it's like it's a joke. So, it's a joke to live here. But that's in the last 30 years - I'm drawn back to the women who were persecuted for being witches in the 16th and 17th century, because they were also othered. They could have been othered because they happen to be single, or their husband died or maybe they had some agency because they knew how to use medicinal herbs. More women in Essex were persecuted, than in any other county in England. So, what makes this region specific to being picked on in that way, especially women. The Essex Witch Trials is something that I've been thinking about a lot. During my nine months of research, I was just drawn to it. And I couldn't not include it because those women were othered and I feel othered. It's juxtaposing that othering with the othering that you have today in Essex. Does that answer the question?

EE

Yes. So it's an othering that takes place across race, across gender, across class. And the work is about situating yourself to some extent in the nexus of those.

EJ

Absolutely... I moved to this county in 1999 (I grew up in West London). That's a bloody long time ago, but it's actually only since 2018, at a particular junction in my practice, that I felt I could say I'm from Essex, especially to other black folks in

London. My memory of Southend in particular was all this stuff around the National Front - the National Front and Southend for me went together.

EE

What happened in 2018?

EJ

In 2018, I did my first solo project, and around that time there was a lot happening in the media - in 2016, David Olusoga had written and presented a TV programme about Black and British history. I remember listening to a programme on the radio doing the school run and thinking, God, we're not taught this in school. We're not taught about black presence in England before Windrush. So I found myself working with the historian Steve Martin, who was already aware of the story of Princess Dinubolu - the black woman that came to Southend in 1908. I got some funding from Arts Council England and decided I'm going to respond and put this story out there. The title of the project, *Forgotten Black Essex* came midway through making the work. It was just like, hang on a minute, these stories - of black women who came to and passed through Essex, belong to Essex. Why, does Essex not know about them?

EE

The question is, are these forgotten stories, are they overlooked stories? Are they erased stories?

EJ

They're all three, I think. Forgotten, erased, and overlooked. I mean look at Hester Woodley's story - the enslaved black woman who was brought to Harlow from St Kitts in 1741 and lived there for 26 years. There are parts of Harlow that are named after her - there's a Hester House, there's a Hester Way, but does the person who lives on Hester Way know who Hester Woodley was? Do you know what I mean?

EE

I found your film about her very moving.

EJ

Thanks. So, the 'Forgotten Black Essex' project, resonated with

me on two opposite ends of the spectrum. The Princess Dinubolu story was just like, wow, she's just amazing.

EE

What's her story? She came to Britain in 1908, from where?

EJ

Senegal. Princess Dinubolu from Senegal. I've got some headlines taken from newspapers at the time, but again, we don't have her backstory. The historian Steve thinks that she can't have been a princess from West Africa. What the hell is she doing firstly in Great Yarmouth, trying to enter beauty pageant competitions? In a telegram, she describes herself as light chocolate, which made us also think she might have been mixed-race. Steve thinks that she was just a local mixed-race woman, and possibly that she and Mr. Bacon, who was the manager of the Kursaal (the venue), were trying to pull a stunt! But that idea is a bit rich for me!

EE

There's a long history of people of African origin or black people who would take on the mantle of sovereignty and kind of pass. My take on that is well, so be it. If that's a way that you can assert some agency, well, more power to you.

EJ

And with calling herself a princess, she was able to then cause a national media frenzy. They were just like - how dare this black woman come to England and enter a beauty pageant. Mr Bacon tells her in the telegram reply that he's not sure if she can enter a competition at the Kursaal in Southend - especially because of what happened two years previously. So apparently, in 1906 the Kursaal had a baby competition - where you put your baby on the stage and people would clap and cheer and the loudest wins. So a black baby is put on this stage and the audience went wild - it meant that the black baby won. Mr Bacon is now quoting this in The Evening Standard - that he got stick from people in Southend and was asked why he didn't give the prize to someone from his own country - he describes the baby that won as an ugly, little black nigger.

EE

These stories have a personal resonance.

EJ

Yeah... I guess they have. The difference is the current work shifts from archival narrative to this new kind of exciting, liberating, speculative and fantastical way of making work. I was like, right, okay in 1645 Matthew Hopkins, the so-called Witchfinder General is looking for women that have been dabbling in witchcraft, or 'sleeping with the black devil' - that was the narrative then! But during this same period in history we had African people travelling into England, doing all sorts of things. When you think about geographically where Essex is on the map, facing the North Sea and the mouth of the Estuary, it's so easy to imagine that you would travel via Essex to get into London. So my theory is that maybe one of these women or girls who were persecuted for being a witch, could have been black or mixed-race because we were here; people of African heritage were here in England. So, I started on the journey of making new work for this exhibition thinking, I need to work with real archival documentation, because that's what I've done with my previous works and I have enjoyed that - working with fragmented documents and putting a story together as a kind of a visual representation that resonates with me. But then, I got this light bulb moment and thought - I can put myself in the picture, it doesn't have to be based on actual facts. In chapter one of the film, I refer to a quote John Akomfrah said, which is this - 'In the fictive, one has the possibility of a re-inscription'. I can put myself there, and so this moment can act as a metaphor for - for white supremacy, for racism, and at the same time understand the trauma that those women had to deal with, because black bodies are still being traumatised today.

EE

Toni Morrison talks about something similar, that there's a liberation to storytelling that comes from reaching beyond the fidelity of fact. This realm of further imagining, which brings you closer, she argues, towards an emotional truth rather than dealing with official histories which themselves cannot necessarily be relied upon when we're talking about black histories.

You talk about putting yourself in the picture, which is literally

what you do in this film and in other films. Why is your personal presence so important here?

EJ

I think it's because I always start off with my lived experience. Because it's the one that I'm most familiar with, the one that I know inside out, the one that I discuss nearly every day with my husband, with my daughters, my sisters, my family - it's the conversation I've been having forever. From way back as a child when I would overhear my parents and aunts and uncles talking about the blatant racism that they would face. In a way, I'm performing myself - it's my way of making social commentary and critiquing what I want to say about this world. I don't know if this is making sense, I guess it's complicated and complex.

EE

I guess another way to ask that question is - who is that person? As in, is this you being you? Is this you as someone in the past? Is this you acting as a collective we? Who is this?

EJ

It's all of that. It's partly me, but actually when I'm editing and working with my film director, Andy Delaney, if there's a moment where it looks like it's me, just me, then I've not achieved what I want. It's about me embodying those voices, those sung voices (in chapter one) or the spoken word voices (in chapter three), or somebody's else's story, like Princess Dinubolu's story. It's my interpretation of their story through my body as the vessel. I don't want to get too deep, but I was just thinking, it's a bit like when Christians receive the holy spirit. What I'm trying to say is, it's like when somebody says they received the holy spirit, and so they're leaving themselves open for that to happen. I'm not referring to what I do as spiritual in that sense, but what I'm trying to do is use my body in the work, to embody, the voice of others. And you just see it when it works. So in chapter 2 of the film, I said to Andy, you've got to capture that moment when I'm lost right in there, when I'm really doing Jab Jab. As part of the research for chapter 2, I talked to lots of people - to Grenadian historians to understand what happens when you get into that Jab Jab space- when your body is covered from head to toe in black and you can just be

somebody else.

EE

This is part of a Jab Jab performance to coat your body. What are you covered in?

EJ

I used a proper black powder stage makeup, mixed with olive oil to get a super black finish. Originally the freed enslaved people in Grenada would rub burnt sugar cane on their body, mixed with grease, or even motor oil. But I did it the safe way!

EE

It seems to me that one of the aspects of the work here is this holding of, not just multiple histories, but also of geographies - we can talk about the black Atlantic here. The cultural survivals or heritages that give birth to hybrid identities, hybrid cultural forms. And I think one of the interesting, exciting things you're doing here is trying to hold simultaneously these different positions, these different experiences, memories, these different ways of looking out to the world and gathering back into the world, hold those in your body. And then in the third chapter, you're looking into the future, beyond what has come.

EJ

I deliberately didn't want to leave the audience in the main gallery with 'this is what it's like', this is the present story. I wanted to uplift the audience. All my previous solo works leave the audience with 'this is the present story'. And there is an element of that in this exhibition (in Gallery 2 for example), but I always knew I didn't want to end with a critique of the past or the present. It was so exciting to look forward - to look forward for Essex. To do it for this county...

The interview is reproduced in full at www.fpg.org.uk

Glossary

Jab Jab is satirically enacted scenes from the days of slavery associated with new strength and liberation. The word 'Jab' originates from the French word 'diable,' meaning devil and represents the evil inflicted by the white colonialist on enslaved African people. Jab Jab is performed during the period of carnival by covering the body in black from head to toe as a symbol of remembrance and defiance. The origins of carnival can be traced to the festivities leading up to Lent in the French colonies of the Caribbean, where the higher classes of these islands masqueraded in costly, elaborate costumes and danced to the music of well-tuned orchestras. Being of little means, the ex-enslaved Africans participated in these festivities by smearing themselves with the ashes of burned cane and oil or grease. They used the beating of biscuit tins, oil drums, and the blowing of conch shells to create music as they satirically enacted scenes from the days of slavery. Today, Jab Jab represents the balance between mass action and mass joy. It is an expression of freedom and an important aspect of national identity for the people of Grenada and Carriacou.

Afrofuturism is a cultural aesthetic formally articulated and penned by the scholar Mark Dery in his essay *Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose* in 1994. However, it is said that the idea was born in the minds of thousands of enslaved Africans passing the horrific 'Middle Passage' while saying prayers for their lives and that of their descendants. These were the first Afrofuturists, and they brought to life what we know as the definition today. Afrofuturism is speculative fiction where supernatural, fantastical, historical, and futuristic elements merge together. Technology, Afrocentricity, African cosmology, and spirituality are used as tools for activism and social cohesion. Afrofuturism is an avenue through which African and African-descended imaginaries can be re-examined, offering counterstrategies to past and present western narratives. It is confident in itself, imagining a world that encourages better conditions for people of African descent through literature, music, technology, and the arts.

Old Knobbley is an 800 year old English Oak Tree located in

Mistley, Essex. In the seventeenth century, the surrounding area was inhabited by Matthew Hopkins, an English witch hunter. According to local folklore, the tree may have also been used as a place of sanctuary for 'witches' being hunted during the Essex Witch Trials.

Dedham Vale is located on the border between Essex and Suffolk, and has been designated as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty since 1970. Dedham Vale is Essex's only designated AONB. The area is often colloquially referred to as 'Constable Country', due to the British painter John Constable (1776 - 1837) frequently using the area as the subject for his revolutionary landscape paintings.

About the artist:

Elsa James (b. 1968, London, England) is a British African-Caribbean, conceptual artist and activist living in Essex since 1999. She studied as a mature student at Chelsea College of Arts, University of the Arts London (2006–10) and Goldsmiths College, University of London (2013–15).

Her work intervenes in the overlapping discourses of race, gender, diaspora and belonging. Her black British identity ignites her interdisciplinary, collaborative and research-based practice, located within the fields of contemporary performance, text-based art, socio-political and socially engaged art. Her works employ recovery, recollection, and the archives, to examine ideas surrounding regionality of race and black subjectivity. *Forgotten Black Essex* (2018) and *Black Girl Essex* (2019) explore the historical, temporal and spatial dimensions of what it means to be black in Essex; England's most misunderstood, and, homogeneously white county.

James has presented, screened and exhibited projects nationally, and online internationally, including Autograph (ABP), London; Axisweb, Wakefield; Beecroft Art Gallery, Southend; Big Screen Southend at Focal Point Gallery, Southend; The White House, Create London, London; Cubitt, London; Firstsite, Colchester; Furtherfield, London; Magic Me, London; Metal Culture, Southend; RadicalxChange Conference, New York; Site Gallery, Sheffield and Tate Exchange at Tate Modern, London.

In 2021, she was a finalist for the Freelands Award with Focal Point Gallery; a selected artist for Bloomberg New Contemporaries; the Government Art Collection acquired work from The Blackness Series (2016 to date), and was one of four co-curators of the live digital launch weekend for Estuary Festival.

List of works: Gallery 1

Othered in a region that has been historically Othered, 2022
Three-part film installation, 4K video with stereo sound
Total Duration: 25:29 mins.

Chapter One: Contemporary Echoes of the Subjugation of the Women of Essex

'In the fictive, one has the possibility of a re-inscription' - John Akromfrah, 2021

Location: Old Knobbly Tree, Mistley
Duration: 10.34 mins

Chapter Two: A Jab Jab Awakening Towards a New Essex

'Because we have been troubled'... - High Mas, Kevin Adonis Browne, 2021

Location: Constable Country, Dedham Vale
Duration: 05:17 mins

Chapter Three: An Afrofuture Narrative for Essex

'Afrofuturism takes that 'othering' and turns it into a zone of possibility and new dreaming' - Dark Matter, Ekow Eshun, 2021

Location: Under the M25, Thurrock
Duration: 09:38 mins

Window gallery

Ode to David Lammy MP, 2022

Black neon

Dimensions: 9000 x 300 mm

Words taken from a passionate and moving speech by the Member of Parliament in 2018 responding to the Windrush Scandal. As Lammy put it : 'the Windrush scandal was more than a unique mistake caused by officials - it was a disgraceful and as yet unresolved display of a toxic and racist undercurrent driven

by public alarm over immigration’.

Corridor to Gallery 2

The Journey, 2022

Sound work

Duration: 14:45 mins, on a loop

Sound memory inspired by a vivid but eerie two-hour journey travelling from the capital, Accra, to Elmina Castle, Ghana, in 2005. Erected in 1482 by the Portuguese, the castle became one of the most important stops on the route of the Atlantic slave trade. The journey references a small doorway at the castle referred to as the ‘door of no return’; this was the portal through which enslaved Africans boarded the ships that would take them on the treacherous journey across the Atlantic known as the ‘Middle Passage’.

Gallery 2

The Black Interior, 2022

13 Silkscreen prints on plike black 330gsm paper

Dimensions: 680 x 680 mm, each

The Black Interior, named after the poet Elizabeth Alexander’s book of the same title from 2004, is a collection of stories from four black men who live or have grown up in Essex and have anonymously shared their experiences. The collection forms part of ‘The Blackness Series’: an ongoing series of text works from 2016, documenting lived experience alongside broader critical social commentary.

The Black Interior Audio Edit, 2022

Sound work, duration: 12:16 mins, on a loop

Abstracted and fragmented noise from the 1970s and 80s television, which at the time aired many programmes for prime time viewing that were unapologetically and bluntly racist.

Cabinets

The Black Interior Mini Print Edition, 2022

15 Silkscreen prints on plike black 330gsm paper

Edition of 3 + 1AP. Dimensions: 280 x 280 mm.
Please ask if you would like to purchase one of these prints.

Foyer Wall

The Black Essex Flag, 2019

Appliqué flag made from black cotton satin, black rayon, black metallic lurex and black Italian patent leather backed with wool for relief effect. Dimensions: 1210 x 1820 mm

Replicating the official county flag of Essex, which dates back to the 17th century, *The Black Essex Flag* was produced with the ambition to demarcate black space within the collective mindset and narratives held about Essex and its people.

Recently acquired by The Beecroft Art Gallery, Southend Museums, purchased with support from the Arts Council England/ V&A Purchase Grant Fund, Art Fund and the SHARE Museums East Development programme (using public funding by Arts Council England).

Film Credits

Othered in a region that has been historically Othered, 2022
Written, Produced and Performed by Elsa James

Director and Editor Andy Delaney. Sound Composer and Designer Trevor Mathison. Music Composer for Chapter One Paul Gladstone-Reid MBE. Movement Director for Chapters One and Three Lea Orož. Costume Designer Symone Williams. Costume Designer's Assistant Alison Williams. Make-up for Chapters One and Three Jamilat Charles. Make-up for Chapter Two Storm Thompson. Drums and Conch Shell for Chapter Two Ken Lawrence and Niles Hailstones. Field Recordist and Camera Assistant Graham Tobias. Colourist Adrian Seery. Drone Operator Struan Wallace. Lighting Crew Alex Wallace and Scott Wallace. Researcher Holly Firmin. Consultant for Chapter One Syd Moore. Audio Stories for Chapter One CAST (Communities and Sanctuary Seekers Together). Consultants for Chapter Two Lisa Williams and John Angus Martin. Focus Group for Chapter Three Black Student Societies at the University of Essex, Queer Focus Group Chapter Three Fanny Von Beaverhausen, Elliot Gibbons, George Morl, and Lu Williams. Voiceover for Chapter

Three Nathan Chaplin. Titles Rich With

Sound Work Credits

The Journey, 2022, The Black Interior Audio Edit, 2022.
Trevor Mathison and Elsa James

Exhibition Production Credits

Screen prints typeset by Sue Withers and Andrew Moller, Screen prints printed by K2 Screen, Neon made by Neon Circus, Wall Vinyl Design by Fraser Muggeridge Studios, Audio Visuals by KSO Digital, Production Assistant to Elsa James Sue Withers, Curator James Ravinet, Gallery Director Katharine Stout'

Funded by Arts Council England, Focal Point Gallery and Southend-on-Sea City Council

Thanks

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Public Programme

Join us for Gallery Tours, Workshops, Talks. An Associate Programme of artist moving image will be presented on Big Screen Southend throughout the exhibition (see separate booklet).

To book yourself a ticket or find out more, visit our website www.fpg.org.uk

About Focal Point Gallery:

Focal Point Gallery supports the production and presentation of new and recent contemporary art that challenges us to think and feel differently about locality, our sense of self and the importance of communities. Our wide-ranging and pioneering artistic programme is relevant to local and national audiences alike, through exploring current concerns that also resonate internationally. Based in Southend-on-Sea on the Thames Estuary, FPG's activities take place in locations across the region with our reach extended by working collaboratively with like-minded partners.

As a key focus of our output, Focal Point Gallery's learning programme aims to engage people of all ages in current debates around contemporary art, and looks to extend and develop new audiences. We consider the philosophies and working methods of the artists in our exhibitions programme as the starting point for inspiration, aspiration and discussion in the community. On this basis, the gallery seeks to proactively engage with a wide range of local community groups, schools, young people and children.

Focal Point Gallery also curates and commissions an on-going programme of artist moving image, screened daily on Big Screen Southend; a permanent outdoor video facility located adjacent to our main gallery space in Elmer Square.

Donate

Focal Point Gallery is a not-for-profit organisation, which relies on support from grant-giving bodies, trusts, businesses and individuals for its exhibition, learning and public programmes. All donations directly support these programmes and our ambition to support great art across Essex.

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