

Selina Thompson

Gender, Performance & Identity



Lynnette Moran Interviews Selina Thompson

SELINA THOMPSON, UK BASED ARTIST, UNDERTOOK THE COLLABORATIVE ARTS PARTNERSHIP PROGRAMME (CAPP) RESIDENCY WITH CREATE AND FINGAL ARTS AT LYNDERS MOBILE HOME PARK PORTRANE IN AUTUMN 2016.

She sat down during her time in Ireland to talk with Lynnette Moran, lead producer of CAPP and director of Live Collision , for a conversation covering a wide ranging number of issues in relation to her live art practice and award winning performances.

LM: On your website, Selina , in your own words you describe yourself as an artist and performer based in Leeds whose work is both playful, and intimate focused on the politics of identity and how that defines our body's lives and environments. There is a really beautiful quote on your site also, from a review by Harold Offeh, from 'This is Tomorrow' that describes your work as work that isn't about answering questions it's about igniting an internal discussion in each of us that allows for the possibility of self awareness analysis and reflection.

Yea it is, it would be lovely if that was an accurate description of my work, I'm not sure if I'm allowed to say that because I guess I can never properly experience my work. But that is what it's aiming to do, yea it's aiming to stimulate a conversation about all of that stuff that is sort of bubbling underneath every day, specifically around identity and that for me means loads of things, it means like all of the things you'd expect it to mean so race and gender, and sexuality and age and religion and mental health, physical health, where you live. For me I think in a way saying your work is about identity politics, it's like as broad as saying your work is about people. But that's what I'm interested in.

Selina, your work is collaborative and socially and politically engaged, and the outcomes of your work are most often presented in a live context. If you look at live practice as an outcome for the dialogues and articulation of your work, why is that the mode of practice in which you operate..?

[Well for example,] I have a piece called 'Race Cards' ...and the way that piece worked was that I was in a room for 12 hours, just writing loads and loads of questions about race. And then my producer, long suffering and very kind, would take the questions I had written and stick them on the wall, and the contract for the audience ...was that you could enter the space on the condition

Front Cover:

Dark and Lovely Selina Thompson (2015)

Photo: Richard Davenport

that you answered a question. And I don't do that work in that way anymore, because it took a lot out of me, but I loved that work, I was really proud of it in a way that you rarely get to be. It did exactly what I wanted it to do and what it enabled for me was two things: the first was that it allowed me to get a load of questions that I live with on a daily basis which I think often people who are white and as such not 'Other', don't have to deal with, but I, as a black woman dealing with constantly, [allowed me to] get those [questions] out of my body and put those into a space, where people can see them and see them in an overwhelming way.

It also allows me to completely control the terms of that conversation because it's not a back and forth, so you can't answer a question, dismiss it and leave. You are left with all of that and it stops being my responsibility and I guess that work becomes like a series of provocations. And for me, that's a work that's between a live performance and visual work, especially now because my body is not in it anymore which was terrifying for me. Now it's like this installation of 1000 questions and people go in and they read them and you are left with the residue of a 24 hour performance. But it reads like such a stream of consciousness and I love work like that ...you have the potential to talk about something that's full of risk and hold the risk in your body.

My first 'Chewing the Fat' [performance 2013] I made because there was a huge issue with eating disorders in my year at Uni, something about the way that girls are socialised, also the university context, and the fact that it was a very intense year of 30 quite highly strung women, just meant that we weren't able to have blunt conversations about eating disorders, about weight, about body image and I wanted those conversations to happen. So I used my stories and my body to create a context ...I have taken the risk, I have been really honest and exposed and bare and it's there, it's

abject. There was a lot about abjection in that work. So maybe hopefully if I have done that, it makes it easier for you to then have the conversation. That's what I'm always hoping for. And in *Race Cards* ...even though my body is out of it now, what started off as this 12 hour endurance thing, which is a combination of super academic stuff ..and other stuff. So again it's like going into all of this stuff that is in my body and my autobiography and my memory. And all of this reading and learning and analysis that I have done, I'm putting it in a great big space, clearing it out of my body, in the hope that it then creates a launch pad for other people to have these conversations or to go away and think about it. Maybe if I'm really lucky, to pause for thought the next time before they try and touch somebody's afro! Or to know that they are not alone, if these are things that are in their autobiography, and [know] they are not crazy. So, yea, I think that risk that you take into your body when you make a live performance is a really like fertile radical space, that potentially can make stuff happen can change the way that people think. But I think is all art can ever do is change the way people think and hopefully that changes other bigger things.....there is so much anger in *Race Cards*... I think you do have to be pretty livid to sit down for 12 hours and write all those questions out, you have got to be pretty angry. And I'm not angry in that same way [now], maybe because I have done *SALT* which is a project where I retraced the Transatlantic [Slave Trade] Triangle on a cargo ship, to sail from the UK to Ghana then Jamaica and then back to the UK and that was just really like, if *Race Cards* is full of anger then *SALT* is full of pain. But in the same way that *Race Cards* transformed the anger I think *SALT* transformed the pain. So that is always the way with art, (it) is definitely something I'm getting out of it that is cathartic.

And sometimes I feel like that my practice broadly has like two halves....So there is the half which is the work where I'm often

aware of the fact that because my work is characterised as live art, it can potentially go out [to] like your standard white middle class art-audience. And then there is the half of it, which is almost always involved and deeply embedded with people whose identity aligns with mine. So, when I was making *Chewing the FAT* I kept going to these Weight Watchers meetings, and interviewing sort of, other fat mainly women, often working class mums and nans, the main care givers in the home, who were often like super stressed and super angry. And eating was their coping mechanism. And then making *Dark and Lovely* which was all about black women, working class women. And then this next project which is going to be working with black teenage girls and we'll always do work to try and get that audience in with the work as well, but you know you are going [also] to get this other strata of society [white middle class art]. So I'm always trying to think about, what do I want to say to that audience, how do I want to challenge that audience ... but also like making sure that a [section of an] audience feels seen in my work, because I don't always feel seen in the work I go to see and sometimes that's a problem and sometimes it isn't.

With the kinds of groups of people you have worked with, would you say for example collaborative processes are formal or informal?

Informal - they have to be. So *Dark and Lovely* is my show about black hair, afro hair and it was based in hairdressers in an area of Leeds called Chapeltown for 6 to 9 months on and off. It was the most stressful time of my life, because I was working at Lush to pay my rent ... And then for my research for this project I was working in shops and barber shops but for free so I could talk to people. And when I first was doing it, I would go in with a Dictaphone and pen and paper but people didn't talk to me ... because you become like this weird Louis Theroux character, you become like a documentary

“I THINK THAT RISK THAT YOU TAKE INTO YOUR BODY WHEN YOU MAKE A LIVE PERFORMANCE IS A REALLY FERTILE RADICAL SPACE, THAT POTENTIALLY CAN MAKE STUFF HAPPEN, CAN CHANGE THE WAY THAT PEOPLE THINK. BUT I THINK ALL ART CAN EVER DO IS CHANGE THE WAY PEOPLE THINK AND HOPEFULLY THAT CHANGES OTHER BIGGER THINGS...”

film maker. And I'm not really making documentary work, because I'm too involved in what I'm making work about. I'm not someone from outside of a community going into it. ...I go and I try and set up context ..I'm going to be with them all afternoon, I'm going to be with them all day, maybe we'll cook together, maybe we'll go for a walk, maybe there will be something that they show me, maybe I'll be in their home, maybe I'll see them 2 or 3 times. Because I want the opportunity for our dialogue to go somewhere that I couldn't possible plan for. And in my experience that happens with time and allowing spontaneity. ... And I'm interested in how can you collaborate with people and create that space for someone that is a hairdresser and maybe doesn't very often get the space to sit down and step back and analyse. So much of what funders and producers and programmers and all sorts of people do for art is create space to step back and think. ...I'm always trying to think

about how do I extend to collaborators the things that are in the artists' toolbox that we take for granted almost.

In a way it's about how you actually get to the point where it becomes freely available for people to talk about and share their opinions on all of those things.

Dark and Lovely and *Race Cards* are really interesting because they are like sister works I guess and the strategies are really different. So with *Dark and Lovely* it's 'I'm going to build this giant ball of hair and we'll fill it with rum punch and we'll make it look a bit like my nans house and it will smell nice. And someone is going to do my hair and we are all going to be gathered together,' It's very very intimate and in that intimacy is how I can ask these hard questions, because the questions are so, in their way, so violent and that violence is located in a rose tinted domestic setting. So it has to be like that. Whereas if it's *Race Cards* it's like black and white, it's cards, fountain pen, hard wooden desk, quite big rooms because that also felt important to me ... in *Dark and Lovely* you create a soft space so that you can analyse these questions without feeling attacked. In *Race Cards* you create a space that asserts these questions and doesn't step back from them and doesn't allow what often happens when you ask these questions which is the that you watch people do sort of debating linguistics to avoid their complicity. But they are both seeking to do the same thing in a way. *Race Cards* and *SALT* and *Dark and Lovely* and are all talking with each other.

You are on a residency at the moment as part of the CAPP Programme*. Can you tell us about that?

...What I'm currently doing is writing Ten Walks so it will be like a little booklet and I'm staying an area called Portrane which is by the

sea, and is small, I always feel like I'm being like a really insulting city person when I say that, but Portrane is small. When you walk, people talk to you quite a lot... I think I have seen two other black people in Portrane (in all the time) since I have been there. So the presence of my body elicits questions, so I find that if someone says hello and I say hello back they'll stop and they'll talk. So I'm kind of writing these interactions into the walks I guess. So they are kind of like myths, they are kind of like instructions of how to walk along the beach, kind of like diary entries, they are a bit wibby-wobbly. But it was so interesting to be back by the sea again because I spent such a long time at sea this year. We were talking earlier about Beyonce's formation and a lot of that is about water... I have noticed in a lot of work from black artists and creatives that there seems to be a returning to the sea and returning to water. Because it's this space between worlds and the ocean is such a grave for black bodies and in a way it's sort of where blackness is born, sorry it's really depressing. There is a writer, who is like an afro pessimist, and they argue that enslaved people are picked up on the coast of Africa as African people and by the time they get off the ships in the Americas or the Caribbean they are enslaved units of cargo and there is this transformation that takes place in the ocean, and it's in the middle of the ocean that blackness is born and created.. And I was and still am obsessed with this theory and also because the pressure there was...I worked a little bit of time in dialogue with a forensic chemist and she was saying that [with] a body thrown under water in the Atlantic the pressure ... would crush the bones within about a fortnight, so you wouldn't find the bones, you would just find salt, it would dissolve almost instantly. So water in its very core is full of black bodies and that's why I always find myself thinking about it. It's really depressing sorry.

It's not depressing; it's really interesting in terms of also contemporary society and a lot of the images that we are very aware of in the circumstances in terms of how the water has become this place of as you describe a space in between and holding so much hope for people in terms of transforming themselves in one place to another, travelling from one place to another and actually quite often that hope isn't fulfilled and that's also a relevant tragedy of our modern time as well. So Lynders Mobile Home Park is the place where you are staying and it's in collaboration with Fingal County Council and Create Ireland and the CAPP residency. And so the 10 scripts or the 10 texts [you are working on] are they a kind of a guide for future visitors, for future resident artists?

Yea, I hope so, what I'd like them to do is be like in like a little box with ...some other stuff so that you could figure that out, so that you can open it and it's there as a welcome for you and really thinks about those big walks that you can do around the peninsula, that is really exciting - how far can I walk, follow this coast around , where will I get to. Yea I hope it's there for other artists that come.

Tell us a little bit about the new project you have on the horizon. We've spoken elsewhere about you building partners around that project but the partners that you are building are not just programming partners, they are partners who bring you to the route of the communities you want to work with. Can you talk a little bit about that?

Yea so my next project is called the 'Missy Elliott' project, we are going to be working with teenage girls in the UK and teenage girls in estates, black teenage girls looking at what it is to be a black teenage girl right here right now, using Missy Elliott as our artistic starting point, because she is great, and she's weird! And I think that that's really important. I want to plan with those young women, I want to work with them

as fellow live artists. ... teenage girls are like powerful mavericks who navigate this world that seeks to control them and then come out the other side. So I'm interested in looking at something like that, I don't know how that's going to manifest exactly, that's why I'm giving myself a long time to make it. ...[we have] our partners who are our theatres but also in every city we have got a small pot of money for someone who we are loosely calling an engagement or education officer. ..So we want to work with someone like that, whose going to work with us on putting together the workshops, thinking about where the best places to place them in the city, how it can be fun and exciting... because I don't want to speak for teenage girls on behalf of teenage girls. ...I want to make sure that I have worked with young women and seen how they work and how they make, so that what we make at the end, (a) we have made a genuine actual collaboration and I need time to learn how to collaborate with them, but (b) also say that what's made feels like something that came out of a teenager girls head and that sort of really loopy gorgeous way of thinking that teenagers have which you sort of lose and for a while you are embarrassed by, and then you fall back in love with it. So, yea it's really like exciting weird scary place, but I like that it's a project that feels really like quenchy is the word I'll go for, I don't know if that's a real word. But you know when you open an orange and it's like zest and juice and bright orange, that's how that project feels in my head.So I guess in its way the Missy Elliott musical is me thinking of a blueprint like making something that is just free and joyous.

This is an edited transcript of the conversation between Selina Thompson and Lynnette Moran. The full interview will be available on Create's soundcloud channel. Selina Thompson was awarded the CAPP Residency with Create and Fingal Arts in autumn 2016. CAPP is funded through Creative Europe Programme . Lynnette Moran is lead producer of CAPP (the Collaborative Arts Partnership Programme), and founder & director of Live Collision festival.

Arts Council Artist in the Community Scheme

Second Round 2016

Create manages the Artist in the Community Scheme on behalf of the Arts Council

Research and Development Award

Artist; Community / Context; Artform; Location

Shireen Shortt; AllSorts - St Andrews LGBT Youth; Community of interest; Visual arts; Dublin

Jenny MacDonald; St Patrick's Mental Health Services; Arts and Health; Theatre; Dublin

Louise White; Lantern Centre International Women's Group; Community of interest/Cultural Diversity; Theatre; Dublin

Research and Development Award with Mentoring

Artist; Community / Context; Artform; Location (Mentor)

Oonagh Murphy; I-identity LGBT Support Group; Community of interest; Theatre; Dublin (Fearghus Ó Concúir)

Alain Servant; Horizons, St John of God Kildare; Arts and Disability; Circus; Kildare (Dylan Tighe)

Emily Waszak; Japanese Tea Ceremony of Dublin; Cultural Diversity; Visual arts; Dublin (Clodagh Emoe)

Siobhan McGibbon; Galway University Hospital Radiology Dept; Arts and Health; Visual arts; Galway (Marielle MacLeman)

Project Realisation Award

Community; Artist; Project title; Context; Artform; Location

Short Term:

The New Normal; John Conway; The New Normal; Arts and Health; Visual arts; Dublin

Long Term:

Migrant Support Group Gort Resource Centre; Treasa O'Brien; Exquisite Gort; Cultural Diversity; Film; Galway

Irish Radical Women Activists; Caroline Campbell; Radical; Community of Interest; Film; Dublin

Neart le Cheile; Jimmy Smallhorne; The Bus Stops Here; Arts and Health; Film; Dublin

The Guesthouse; Fieldwork community; Ian Wilson; HomeSpace; Community of interest; Music; Cork

Rialto Community Network; Islamic Foundation of Ireland women; Laragh Pittman; Haptic Carpet: Khayamiya; Cultural Diversity; Visual arts; Dublin

Panel: Orla Moloney, Director, Droichead Arts Centre; Daniel Jewesbury, visual artist and curator; Liz Burns, curator and Programme Manager, Fire Station Artist Studios. Observer: Ann O' Connor, Adviser, Arts Participation, Arts Council.

Arts Council Artist in the Community Scheme

Bursary Award 2016: Collaborative Film

The Arts Council Artist in the Community Scheme Bursary Award 2016 aims to support individual professional filmmakers working in the area of collaborative film.

The Arts Council has provided this €10,000 bursary award as part of the Artist in the Community Scheme, which is managed by Create.

The purpose of the Bursary Award is to support and nurture professional arts practice and it is specifically aimed at a filmmaker who has a track record of working collaboratively with communities of place or interest. The Bursary Award of €10,000 provides the selected filmmaker with time and resources to carry out research and to reflect on practice. More particularly, the Bursary allows the filmmaker to consider key questions associated with creating film using collaborative methodologies.

It is expected that the successful applicant will share the learning arising from the Bursary with the wider film community and collaborative arts sector. Create will work in partnership with Filmbase in providing information sessions and on the selection process.

For further information, contact Katherine Atkinson, Project Support, Professional Development, support@create-ireland.ie

Deadline for applications: 14 November at 5pm

For full details on application process and criteria, visit www.create-ireland.ie/bursary-award/bursary-award-2016-collaborative-film

NB This Bursary Award does not fund the making or production of films

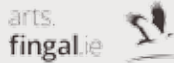
WELCOME TO CREATE NEWS

This is the twenty-first edition of Create News and features an artist interview. Create News is published twice yearly in May and October. It is sent free of charge, features a guest writer and offers the latest information on Create events and services. If you do not wish to receive further editions, please write or email us at info@create-ireland.ie. You will automatically receive copies unless you ask us to remove your details from the list. If you would like to receive a personal copy of Create News please email info@create-ireland.ie and include details of name, address and postcode.

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CREATE AND COMMON GROUND

Diverse Engagements and
Collaborative Practice Sonia Boyce

Date: 8 November Time: 4-6pm

Venue: Irish Museum of Modern Art, Dublin

Common Ground and Create are partnering on this discussion event as part of the Create Debates and Common Ground's CURIOUS CONVERSATIONS. This event will host a wide-ranging discussion exploring culturally diverse participatory art practices. Panel includes UK based artist Sonia Boyce, Vukasin Nedeljkovic of Asylum Archive and Dublin based artist Laragh Pittman who is currently working with a Muslim women's group in the context of her CITIZEN ARTIST award. Drawing on direct project experience of these artists and collaborators, the discussion will focus on a range of questions on socially engaged art practice in the context of cultural diversity, ethics and representation; politics of engagement and also on the issue of how artists work with integrity, solidarity and real partnership with culturally diverse groups, avoiding the act of 'Othering' or 'Exoticism?'



Image:
Screening of *Come Into The Gardens* by Outlandish Theatre Platform (Maud Hendricks) and Kilian Waters