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Julianknxx On Exhibiting His Poetry On Screen At Gagosian

Christina Donoghue



The new Gagosian show *Rites of Passage* brings together 19 artists with a shared history of migration. Editorial assistant Christina Donoghue speaks with artist Julianknxx on his new work that sees him adapt his poetry for the screen.

In 2018, the now shadow foreign secretary made a speech in response to the Windrush scandal. 'I am here because you are there', echoed David Lammy, words which have now inspired not only Ella James's artwork - opening a new exhibition at Gagosian *Rites of Passage* - but the exhibition's overarching theme as well.

Exploring the idea of 'liminal space' - a coinage of anthropologist Arnold van Gennep - *Rites of Passage* is structured in correspondence with liminality's three stages concerning the idea of migration: separation, transition, and return. Curated by Gagosian's associate director Péjú Oshin, artists were tasked with responding to these phases, each reflecting on their personal experience and how it fits into a broader context.

Julian Knox, aka Julianknxx, is one of those artists. Using words, moving images and performance as a means of self-expression, Julianknxx's work is deeply personal and often sees the artist centre his poetry around the complexity of identity and the unspoken history of his native country Sierra Leone. For *Rites of Passage*, he presented a piece that blurred the lines

between poetry and film, presenting ...*in a whirlwind of encounters*. As for the piece itself? Separated from the viewer by a single piece of stretched fishing net, the artist's poetry plays on the rule of dance as his figures appear, disappear and reappear in a constant loop. The intention is clear, especially considering Sierra Leone was a major departure point for the slave ships to the Americas. Intrigued by his offering to the group show that involved 18 other artists, all with their own story to tell, I spoke with Julianknxx to find out more.

With cinema, you're able to show rather than tell – Julianknxx

Christina Donoghue: Can you explain a bit more about where the idea for this piece came from?

Julianknxx: The piece is called ...*in a whirlwind of encounters*. This is taken from an Edward Glissant poem, where the full line is 'in a whirlwind of encounters: it is the utopia that never ceases, and that opens tomorrow like a split fruit', which deals with the themes I'm exploring around identity and building new worlds. I'm looking at the idea of liminality, in-between spaces, or space in which we, African people, can be content with our existence - whilst rethinking our history, what our rites of passage are - reimagining the idea of us.

CD: Why did you decide to play with the medium of film? How do you think this has enhanced your work's perspective?

JK: With cinema you're able to show rather than tell. Film evokes emotions in a different way, when you're approaching something you haven't seen before especially. There's a way it can transfer emotions that works so well. Seeing and feeling these 'encounters', such as the masquerades, it works. Often when you engage with black art and talk about masquerade, people have a very specific preconception, but cinema affords me the ability to reimagine their perception. I'm able to nudge the viewer to reimagine what is 'African art', or what is masquerade. The poems still live on the page, but they do something else when they are seen, performed, and enlarged with sound. I'm not moving away from the poem itself, only opening it up.

CD: What do you hope the viewer will take away from your film?

JK: Whatever you're thinking and seeing, question it. The way the title is written even, I'm encouraging the viewer to question the question, and question their perceptions. I'm questioning identity, and the space that we exist in as African people in the western world.

CD: How do you think your work fits in with the exhibition's wider context? Why do you think the theme is particularly pertinent to today?

JK: One of the biggest things we're dealing with is this idea of how we engage with the living archive and the fact that we're here today. What kind of mark are we making? As the show is curated by Péjú, she's the one that imagined the concept and why I fit in the show. I wouldn't want to put words in her mouth, maybe this question is for her. For me, the show is presenting all the artists as Africans that are thinking about our identity and our lineage, and I guess the ways in which we have developed our own 'rites of passage'. Whilst considering what has been passed down to us. As a Krio person, I am constantly existing in a state of constant rethinking, and considering what my existence looks like depending on where I am situated.

CD: Have you faced any challenges in the making of the film? If so, how did you overcome them?

JK: Filmmaking is expensive! But also it's highly collaborative. So you're dealing with a lot of people, which is both the fun part and the hard part. Working with so many collaborators will always come with its own set of challenges.

