



# Brent 2020, London Borough of Culture



## BRENT BIENNIAL - Children of the Sugar by Yasmin Nicholas

Yasmin: Hello, everyone, set to start everything off, welcome to the Children of Sugar podcast with me, Yasmin Nicholas, who's interviewing me is the lovely filmmaker and artist Judah. So as part of my background, I come from North West London, Brent, Kensal Green.

And I've been here nearly all my life. Came here at 18 months from Kilburn. I've always been in Brent, with my education background.

I also went to Uni in Middlesex University from 2012 to 2015, so I've had a vast amount of experience within education. And for this Brent Biennial, I was commissioned to do some work with Brent 2020, London Borough of Culture in which I was able to do 10 pieces that would be put around the borough of Brent as a site specific project. And what was great about it was that I was able to meet various people from the borough, shop owners, people who worked had their own businesses and it was it was quite fun trying to kind of like see what they were thinking about when it came to our borough. However, obviously due to Covid-19 guidelines, a lot of the things that I did want to do were kind of disrupted. Yeah, I had a lot of fun doing this. It basically really interesting just looking at different scenes from Brent, you know, trying to kind of find out what Brent means to a lot of people who reside here as well, and just exploring that in the middle of home. So from market stalls, you know, I was able to hear different stories, but also, you know, really being able to see what the culture of cultures is meant as in borough, because we have a fruitful amount of culture in our borough and it's so wonderful to see the amount of different artists that reside here and the amount different imagination that resides here as well. So I'm going to hand off to Judah Attille, she's going to introduce herself as an interviewer.

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Judah: My name is due to Judah Attille, formerly known as Martina Attille. I'm currently a final year doctoral student at University of the Arts London. My training is supported by the consortium Techni through a studentship made possible by funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council.

In 1988, I made a film called Dreaming Rivers, a 30 minute film for the collective Sankofa Film and Video. Sankofa Film and Video were based in Camden during the time of the operation, and the collective members of Sankofa were myself, Isaac Julian, Nadine Marsh Edwards, Maureen Blackwood and Robert Kruse. And we made our first feature together called The Passion of Remembrance in 1986. So I'm really interested to know why is Yasmin uses the themes and why is she works with the imagery she uses to tell her stories and why the stories that she tells are important enough for her to commit to the life of an artist in order to tell those stories. So, Yasmin, thank you so much for inviting me. I must say that I'm really keen to have Yasmin's voice lend itself to the commentary throughout, because her voice, I think, gives a lot of information in relation to the images that she's presenting here.

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Yasmin: Ok, so let's start this. What we've also been talking about is my work with different materials as well, and the link that I use with the Wob Dwiyet within my work and the ancestral character. I also



link that with as well. Um, I started using the ancestral characters within my film *Secrets to a Dream*, and it was a thing where I really wanted to kind of start using it because it was something I had seen a while ago. My late, great aunt had all of these beautiful dresses that she used to use when she used to do the Quadrille, which is a traditional dance stemming from Dominica and a few other Windward Island countries as well.

And what happened was that I was so intrigued by it that. To me, they seem so colorful and beautiful and I really just wanted to create some work with it.

With me, throughout my work, I have quite a vivid imagination, and I wanted to use these particular dresses in particular settings as well, so to start it off with the traditional wob.

The wob is the Creole word for robe, and it was introduced to the Caribbean within the 18th century due to English and French colonies that settled in the Caribbean and what happened there was that the slaves that were in these countries were able to kind of wear the dresses on particular best days, you know, and I really want to kind of bring that back to the surface in a modern world. We do, obviously, due to different things, different society events such as Miss Wob you basically have your wob dwiyet and you have to do your dances with it. And it's almost like a pageant, but with traditional dress. And I was so intrigued by it, I really wanted to use the materials and the dresses that I had gained from my late grandparents friend and try and create modern pictures of them as well. So like the one you can see right now. It's a dress, it's not of madwas material, however it is in the traditional wob dwiyet style with the buttons in the front, but also the scarf that you would tie and tuck in around the waist as well, and a traditional hat that has the three peaks on there, sometimes it can have one peak and I was told that one peak is if you're single. I think two is when you're married and three is, I think it's just just how you are, you know, kind of like come out as you are, you know, like. I can't exactly remember what three is, but you have all of these wonderful sentiments behind these, you know, these dresses, you know, and obviously with everything as in it's background, obviously due to colonial days, obviously there was a lot different back then, but these dresses, they worked so well within this work that it was a thing where I just continued to more work with that and the ancestral figure I used and was a symbol of guidance and why she's there to kind of more or less guide me through my work, but as symbol of guidance to the not just a narrator, but to everyone in a way seeking their culture and also somebody being there to kind of help guide you through as well. So it's been quite playful, just kind of trying to discover what she could look like.

So from there, I've just kind of been changing things around, including different scarves, including a veil as well. So for me, the veil that I'd used within some of the pictures. Well, with her wearing it is kind of like a symbolization between it's the veil is kind of like the thin line between the living and the dead as well. So I wanted to kind of include that type of religious imagery into that as well.

Through my finding home series, through that and my *Secrets to a Dream* film, which we're both done in 2018, I very much wanted to put those dresses in a different space in an urban landscape, you know, somewhat as kind of dreary and dark sometimes as London. You know, these colorful dresses created such a contrast. You know, I just wanted to make sure that things looked completely like they were both opposing, however, at the same time, they were also able to make these landscapes beautiful with the colours of these dresses as well.



Judah: So, Yasmin these wob's are, as you say, really colorful and they stand out against the monochrome of the estate in a really dynamic way. And I'm just mindful as I look, you know, beyond the beauty that those traditional outfits from the Caribbean really are connected to a past era, a past era when perhaps women in the Caribbean who dress in this way were not as independent as the women who wear the costumes now for your performance. They perhaps were not as independent as the women who wear these costumes with pride as cultural costumes in the present day. And I'm mindful that these costumes aren't historically neutral, that their history is linked to a history, which is more complex than one that we can just fully appreciate through the beauty of of the costumes. But for me, the wob is still a very, very powerful image and it's something that resonates with me as a filmmaker. And when I made Dreaming Rivers, there's a scene in Dreaming Rivers where the main protagonist, Miss T, she opens her wardrobe and is really important to me at the time that the items of clothing you saw in the wardrobe were very sparse. There was hardly anything in there. And I wanted to make the empty wardrobe contrast to the image of the raffia bag, the straw bag that is visible in the wardrobe, because to me, I wanted to make a connection between clothing and aspiration and belonging and success. And the emptied wardrobe for me was a symbol of perhaps not as not achieving as much as one would hope to achieve in a country which promised to have streets paved with gold where people could make their fortunes.

So that's a point I want to make wanted to make in that clip. I wonder if I could just share that clip with you.

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Yasmin: Even seeing that box that said St. Lucia, you know, that little handbag, even the whole aesthetic of what she's wearing, that's very colorful. It's like she's immune to English culture in a way. Even that small clasp of home that she keeps in her cupboard, is important while she's still searching for her identity here. As like a woman and a mother sticking a longing for her mother country, it connects very well with somebody who is also trying to discover themselves while being from a foreign country rather than the motherland, but trying to figure out who they are within these two, you know, identities. Which one do they fit better into?

And the Sequence to a Dream, sequences more of the narrator doing that in the fact that she is basically being guiding, guided through the entire film by three spirits who come to her on a South London estate to basically let her know that everything she is searching for is inside that person herself.

In that clip of Dreaming Rivers, it's quite dark and it is quite dark and not even just in any physical lighting, but emotionally as well, because it's this person who is longing for something to remind her of her mother country and having the empty wardrobe and turning from Dreaming Rivers into Sequence to a Dream, you have these three spirits who are boldly wearing these dresses that come from colonial history. However, turning the narrative in a way in which Caribbean countries themselves have with wob Dwiyet is and wearing it with a sense of pride.

[Poem: Sequence to a Dream]



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My next film, Bwapen, that's going to be shown, I created in 2014, between 2014 and 2015, early part of it. And what happened there was, just spending a lot of time with my grandparents when I was younger and I wanted to kind of capture my granddad talking to me about Patois.

[Film: Bwapen]

For this section, we'll be talking about the Brent Biennial, which is going on from September to 13 December. This is the mixture of the breadfruit still that I did for the film Metaphors back in 2015, and Well Woman services back in 1986. Well, I didn't create that, but that was from the archival images, so thank you again Brent for letting me use those archival images as well. Wonderful work.

The two corresponded well, as mentioned before, ladies from the Well Women's Services and the work with the breadfruit image from my film because of where it is, especially Kilburn, it's such a place of many different ethnic backgrounds and it both symbolized the many identities of migrants and also foods that have come from different countries that are brought into our communities as well. So I would have actually loved to have seen this in a place like Harlesden as well, because it's so rich in food and culture.

This particular piece, this is situated in between Brondesbury and I think just the top of, before you get to Cricklewood. I really feel like obviously a lot of people who would be able to see it are the people who are driving into Kilburn, especially if they're looking at clothes and everything. This is kind of an invitation right into Kilburn for the many different type of shops that you'll find there.

This particular installation is actually in Church Road. So which is a great place because it's on its way to Harlesden, people who are on their way from, say coming from Willesdon Green can see it or vice versa.

So last but not least, this is another piece from the Children of the Sugar project. It's called Higher Basketball Boys and it's placed on Harlesden High Street

With these particular installations, that were placed around the borough, I really wanted people to interact with them. There's a specific piece, which is on the Harlesden High Street. Usually it's filled up with so many different people of from Caribbean origin or decent. The bar behind it is normally a place where people go up to meet, drink, even sometimes after funerals there are wakes there. Around that same street there's always a hustle and bustle, where people are very social.

I'd hope that my work would be captivated by those people, in which they'd be able to talk to their friends and look at the image and see an image of themselves. I feel that there needs to be a lot more great attention to the borough's culture and the people who make it.

What we're going to be talking about are the actual poems on the artwork that are featured my project. I'm going to read a verse.

[Poem: Basketball Boys]

This particular picture itself, it has three young gentlemen playing basketball. The royal red carpet lined out for the main baller, whose about to score. Hopefully a slam-dunk! But also flowers that are



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on there. I wanted to put something out there in which people were able to see their royalty. That your life means something. Everything, that this whole construct, that the poem and the image is about you elevating and knowing that you are somebody who matters.

[Poem: Back Home]

The line that says 'is a mango sweet feeling' I really want the person reading, experiencing it, to have that taste in their mouth. For them to really enjoy the poem like they were enjoying a piece of fruit, that they're really understanding it, trying to connect with it in a certain way.

The last part of the poem is on top of the image of the breadfruit still from the film *Metaphors*, and Well Women's Services' archival image from 1986. Again thank you to Brent Museum.

[Poem: Back Home]

My Granddad who used to tell me a whole load of stories about everything that went on back home and then you could visualise everything in your mind about how things were. That kind of complexity in having an imagination of a place that only you can imagine in a certain way. It might not be the way you've imagined it, in real life, but this is what all these different stories and parts of culture that you piece together is giving you a vision within your mind that this particular place looks like or is like. It talks about an identity that has been placed on a person and they're still trying to figure themselves out.

For this particular poem, 'Fingerprints', this was created in 2020. I would say out of all the four poems I did, this is the most radical!

[Poem: Fingerprint]

How everyone is dealing with this pandemic is in different ways, however there's still such a darkness and unknown about it as well. Obviously everybody's emotions are in different places with being told one thing and another thing. I really felt that this poem really fit well with the image of the backdrop of Wembley Stadium because it's very much a united place. As I said 'the youth dem will rise', it really gets at you as people collectively come together to find out truths about different problems that are coming from this country; especially the Youth. People who are in their 40s downwards, their finding out a lot more about what goes on within the Government. People are very much in a thinking space right now. People have lost their jobs, people are at home and starting to research about things. Me dropping a line 'a sweet candy apple lining of promise of maybe what's next', speaks to the Government in which we're being handed out little things of maybe something encouraging but then something else. And then there might be something encouraging, but they don't completely know the answers of everything yet. So everybody is sitting, it's always good to stay positive, but at the same time there's a type of limbo about some o