

...Place, Identity and what it is to be Human | Festival of Looking Review

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This year the Folkestone Fringe has stepped up to the huge challenges posed by Coronavirus to deliver their Festival of Looking with imagination, creative skills and empathetic professionalism. The question they posed 'What's happening, exactly?' went right to the heart of it. A forensic look at the physical fabric of this seaside town, its coastal geography, its edge of England location and all that that means at this specific moment in time. The question also asks, who are we, its citizens, this community so intensely thrown in on itself through the months of Lockdown and ongoing time of restrictions. When you ask artists to respond to such questions be prepared for surprises, for new insights, a reshaping of previous conceptions and here in Folkestone's Festival of Looking they have not disappointed, delivering a cornucopia of delights.

With current restrictions in mind the curator, Georgie Scott, and her team designed a festival which could be experienced physically and virtually. Organisationally and technically this is a hugely difficult task, almost impossible to deliver exceptional quality to both audiences, particularly on a low budget. I viewed the Festival entirely online as I was unable to visit Folkestone, as much as I would have liked to. So I am writing from this perspective. Some events and projects were more suitable to virtual interaction, were in fact designed especially for it, and others required physical participation or were greatly enhanced by the ability to feel and explore textures and environments.

In this, year two, of the Festival of Looking, the Fringe together with the Urban Room Folkestone presented outcomes and ongoing investigations of the MagiC Carpets project together with other events. Over the last six months the Irish artist Mary Conroy, this year's Magic Carpets artist, who has been unable to come to Folkestone for her Residency because of Covid, has instead been asking the people of Folkestone to help her get to know the town by exploring the question 'What are you made of Folkestone?' She invited them to respond by photographing what they perceived as the essence of their town, its built environment, its geology, its geography, what gives Folkestone its particularly personality and asked them to upload their photographs to Instagram. So, although Mary Conroy has been unable to be in Folkestone and was not here for the Festival she has continued to be involved virtually from her home in Ireland. The diverse outcomes of the five individual artist's projects form the basis of the programme alongside other initiatives, Antidiary and My Square which were set up in response to the Lockdown and the Live Art Development Agency/ Folkestone Fringe collaborative commission DIY Hope Machines with

Dr Duckie and Daniel Tollady continues his Urban Archive: Folkestone, from last year's Festival of Looking.



What are you made of, Folkestone? By Mary Conroy. Josh Jordan Photography

Black Men Are ... conceived and organised by Lee Desai as part of Black History Month Folkestone was an unusual and rare conversation between six black men living in Folkestone. The talk was curated by the men, prerecorded and then screened, to a small audience, at Brewery Tap with Lee Desai hosting the event and the open discussion. It was also a simultaneous Zoom link open to all who registered to join in. The format worked seamlessly, with only slight distortion of sound in the recording.

It was a relaxed and heartwarmingly frank discussion between men, some who had known each other for many years, others who were more recently acquainted and a couple who had not met before, but who all now lived in Folkestone. Kevin and Jason talked of growing up in Folkestone, of being at school together, of scars of racism experienced as children and young men, but also how they had forged their own identities, rejecting the stereotypes frequently imposed on them and felt very much part of this, their local community. Music was obviously a shared occupation and love for all of them, a way they found to express themselves, both professionally and recreationally. The music world provided a place where their abilities were recognised and their colour, if anything, an asset. Others who had come more recently to Folkestone seeking an interesting and creative community in which to live and thrive, brought with them experiences and knowledge of different lives and journeys. Childhoods in African and European cities which gave them a different sense of history. A different sense of how they saw themselves and were seen by others and how that had shaped who they were. They talked of being sons and fathers and how incredibly important it was to them all to be good role models for the younger generation. They also talked of Arike, their friend who had been a role model to them, a real local identity who had recently died. There was sadness, anger, fear and so much humour, laughter and genuine camaraderie amongst them which was inclusive, relaxing and enabled quite difficult and

uncomfortable things to be said and, more importantly, heard. The music playing the event in and out was a joy and bookended the conversation perfectly.



Black Men Are... Organised by Lee Desai. Josh Jordan Photography

Alongside this was Aida Silvestri's insightful exhibition, which questions the stereotyping of Black men, at the Brewery Tap UCA Project Space, I AM Fully Human. A project, again as part of the Black History Month Folkestone programme, exploring the image of Black men in portraiture and fashion in honour of Arike (1949-2020). Arike was an artist and Folkestone legend who died suddenly just before Black History Month and the Festival of Looking. His presence was strongly felt throughout the Festival, even to me who didn't know him and was only viewing the Festival online. He was clearly a role model and creative force to those around the town, where he had lived for the latter part of his life. Silvestri's strong, clear portraits stood like men of purpose and position, proud and joyful in the courtyard of Brewery Tap, and shown online free and open for all to see and question. Who were these men - musicians, politicians, pop stars, heroes or fashion models? All and none of these labels it seems, they are very human, very real members of Folkestone's diverse community. New role models perhaps for a new generation. In the context of Black Lives Matter and the worldwide protests against the killing of George Floyd, Silvestri asks 'How can we encourage Black men to reclaim their true identity and create their own narrative?' Her title a reminder of the US early sixties civil rights protest cry, I AM a Man!

Dr Duckie's Homemade Mutant Hope Machine continued the connection the Fringe has had with LADA, placing an artist with a group of locally based artists over a six week workshop situation. The interaction with Ben Walters (Dr. Duckie) must have been a shape shifting experience for those five artists if his talk with Diane Dever, Folkestone Fringe Director, was anything to go by! This Zoom discussion was a really brilliant dialogue between two engaged, passionate and articulate speakers and there were no technical problems! Ben introduced us to his ideas embodying the Hope Machines, a means of connecting, supporting, enabling the discovery of possibilities previously unthought of. The physicality of Hope. He asked the artists he was working with to come with some sort of an idea for a project to help start the conversation. The workshops

were not framed for outcomes but the process, the experimentation, testing the water, learning to walk again 'the way we do the thing is the thing.' This is such a gift for any artist, a space for breathing, opening one's eyes even wider. He had them, and us, exploring ideas of unconditional support, subjectivity, flexing unused muscles we had forgotten we had, disrupting the norms, investigating new ways of doing things, being less fixated. Throughout the workshops, more a salon perhaps but skills based, the artists worked with him online although he came to Folkestone for the first and last session. The artists decided to set up a WhatsApp group to ensure an ongoing supportive network and also explored the possibility of creating a queer space for Folkestone, a place to meet up, feel safe, something they felt was lacking in the town. Ben noticed how caring they were to and of each other.

He and Diane talked of the Fringe, of its 12 year life and what next. How the town was changing and the role of organisation developing. The shift in 2014 as the Fringe became more integrated with the Triennial, a surge of ambition, taking on extra young staff and expanding projects and collaborations. Perhaps they had become the establishment? An uncomfortable thought - said Diane! They do, she affirmed, remain constantly alert, questioning, ready to challenge and be challenged, contributing art ingredients to the unfolding development of Folkestone. An expanding organisation and changing landscape can be hard on the individual members of the team and they need nurturing. Ben talked of modelling Care, the importance of relationality - artist to audience, curator to artists. A need for a slower more thoughtful working atmosphere, reciprocal care between artists, organisations, audience. Less focus on outcomes, numbers, tickets, a more qualitative less quantitative experience for all. Less cultural consumerism. By reshaping and nurturing the context within which creative activities take place an enriched and more meaningful experience for all involved will follow. 'Fun is important' was Ben's closing remark! Perhaps on this basis we can shape the post Covid world?

Also taking place on the same weekend as the Festival, The Napier Barracks Welcome to Refugees was a positive proactive gesture of over 150 local people, with colourful banners and music. Staged outside the barracks for those many occupants within. Countering the racist anti-immigration demonstrations of a few groups. To clearly state to these people, who have come to our shores seeking refuge and safety from war torn ravaged countries, that they are welcome in Folkestone. A reassuring demonstration of a community, about a community that is willing to be open and expansive, able to understand the value of new voices, new histories which can be woven into the rich tapestry that is Folkestone, that is England. Images were shown on the Fringe website and the event had very good local News coverage on TV and other media.

Another key MagiC Carpets project which formed part of the Festival programme was Craig Gell's Pent Happenings, his response to 'What's Happening, exactly?'. Gell's ongoing project investigating the flow of water in the Pent stream, is a series of audiovisual works which react to geophysical data. Assisted by a group of local residents in a field gathering workshop the previous day, Craig gathered together all the resulting data and translated it into a sound piece. He showed this together with images of graphs and findings at the Closing Event of the Festival to a physical audience. The event was streamed on Facebook and available to all. As an online experience it was difficult to fully appreciate, although the sound was clear, the images and his comments were not readable or particularly audible as it seemed that the camera had been placed too far back from him and the screen.



Flow Rate Event by Craig Gell. Josh Jordan Photography.

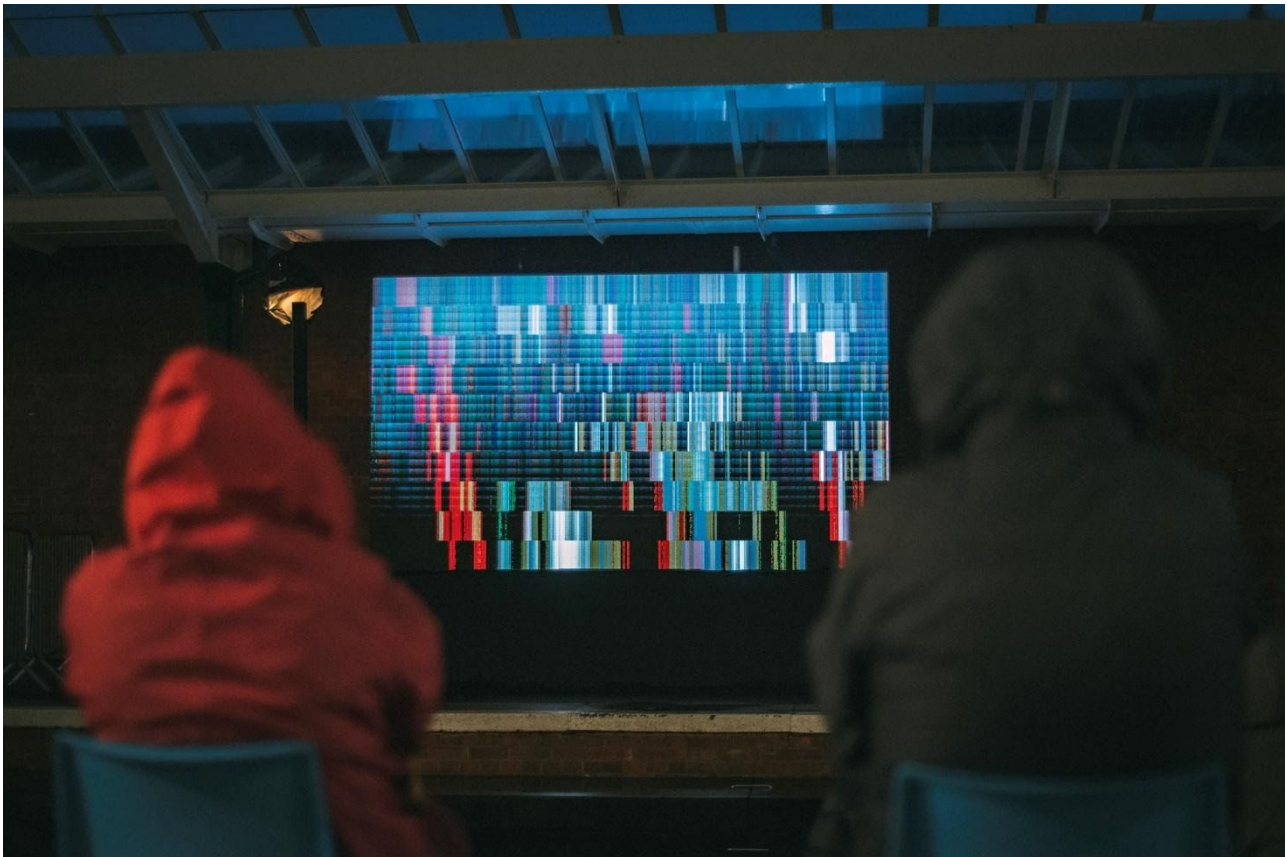
MySquare and Antidiary are two online projects devised by the Folkestone Fringe young team to engage the community during Lockdown which are ongoing. MySquare is a mass participation interactive project for everyone and anyone. Folkestone Fringe are inviting people to choose their square of the world and respond creatively to your significant location on the What3Words app. A huge array of images have been uploaded on to Instagram and shared online, marking the Squares across the ever growing map. A wonderful fluid and expansive project which seems to have contributions from children, families, young and old, truly inclusive, creating a patchwork of ideas.



MySquare Trail. Josh Jordan Photography.

Antidiary, created by Nico Dunsbee, is a thought provoking collection of individual diary entries from Folkestone and beyond. A project offering intimacy and remoteness. From the privacy of home people have been invited to write diary entries of their thoughts of the day and upload them to the Antidiary blog, enabling them to be heard and to hear other voices. A raw personal collection of day to day thoughts and feelings, upsets and joys, unpolished and from the heart, sent out to the unknown. I read through dozens of the pieces. Some short, single thoughts or an emotion expressed succinctly, some much longer, as if the space to speak their truth was so exhilarating they couldn't stop the flow. So many different voices, such a wealth of experiences. All felt authentic, a tiny glimpse into other lives. These narratives combine to form a story of our time, our community, answering, very precisely, the question 'What's happening, exactly?'

Because of the unfortunate technical problems with the streaming of the Launch Event I watched Feral Practice's film *Sum Tymes Bytin Sum Tymes Bit* online after the event. I was very pleased not to have missed it entirely and regretted that other online Festival participants were not so privileged. And what a salutary experience it was, a film for our times. The predicament of our extreme vulnerability, with a pandemic raging here and around the world, species extinction, climate crisis and the ongoing exploitive practises of a capitalist society. Captured in film through the East Kent landscape, its flora and fauna and its sites of industry, historic and contemporary. The bees and birds that continue to return to their traditional habitats, but for how much longer? The fragility of these species, so carefully observed and beautifully filmed contrasted to the edifices of power, old rust crusted ruins of Faversham's gunpowder works, the lethal coastal towers of Dungeness and the seemingly science fiction, but only too real, presence of Planet Earth's great glass scaring of Thanet farmland. Referencing Russell Hoban's *Riddley Walker*, this artist's film eloquently warns of the wanton destruction of human ambition.



Sum Tyms Bytin Sum Tyms Bit by Feral Practice. Josh Jordan Photography.

Leah Thorn's project Visible . Invisible, with her recorded collaborative soundscape of five white women in committed relationships with Black men, was at Brewery Tap. I listened to it online after the exhibition. Leah was Arike's partner, now his widow, so her voice piece was ever more poignant being recorded just after he died. Unbearably sad, achingly beautiful, a hymn to Arike, her love for him, their life together, her white Jewish skin against his black skin, melded together. The experience of race and class, women holding men's trauma, white mothers of black sons. How to warn them of the racism they are destined to encounter out there in that unsafe, particularly for them, world? How to tell them that they are amazing and wonderful but that they will have to work harder to prove it to the white focused world? All protecting their families like lionesses, learning from their own racism, asking 'What is our role as white women?'

To hear these women speak of their experiences informs and shifts perspectives, slowly increasing awareness of that underlying racism deep in this post-colonial culture. These are the tiny steps that we must keep taking to change that culture, to calm the fear of 'other', to open our eyes so we see humanity, not race that cultural construct which can no longer be tolerated in a civilised society. These Black History Month Folkestone projects investigating aspects of Black Lives in Folkestone are important beyond words and are serious contributions to a national artistic and cultural dialogue.



Visible . Invisible by Leah Thorn. Josh Jordan Photography.

The delivery of such a number of high quality events over a short three day festival span is quite remarkable. Folkestone Fringe's ambition and pursuit of excellence is evident in this year's Festival of Looking and I applaud their aims and achievements. The technical problems, which would have only affected online participants, I am sure were frustrating and upsetting for the organisers and not directly their fault, as I understand. Weather and technology, those out of our control things, the bane of any festival. To manage the balance of a physical and virtual festival it would have been useful to have the Zoom/Facebook links listed in the programme. Also any other links to festival content, such as the White Noise soundscape and the Black Men Are.... recorded talk. This would have increased the online visitors' programme and provided open ease of access. I would have liked to hear more from Mary Conroy, I felt her voice was missing, and wonder if a Zoom discussion with her and perhaps the people she worked with could not have been set up. One of the great benefits of working online and the new ease of using Zoom, is that you can host a discussion with people anywhere in the world. The international nature of this festival would have been enhanced by the facilitation of such an event, although I appreciate the extra time and organisation to do this may not have been available. But these are small misgivings, overall I think the Festival of Looking 2020 was a triumph, an artistically rich and innovative series of events, asking intelligent questions about place, identity and what it is to be human. Ideas which will resonate through the community and beyond, shaping and informing what comes next, where to go from here, much needed interjections in this uncertain world. Well done and thank you, Festival of Looking!

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