

SWEET SMELL OF SUCCESS

ARTIST USES SUGAR AND TREACLE TO EXPRESS BLACK SEXUALITY

Sugar and treacle... two of the key ingredients in the work of artist Philomena Francis and part of what makes it so intriguing. I first came across her work some three years ago when I was invited by a friend to view her *Brown Sugar Series*, an exhibition that explored the essence of black female identity through sugar paintings.

I was most impressed with what I saw and there and then tipped her as a key future player in the visual arts. Since then she has graduated with a first-class degree from Chelsea College of Art and Design and now the multicultural arts centre Iniva has commissioned her to make an art installation out of molasses for the expansive front window of its new arts space in Rivington Place, London. She will be the first artist to take up this window commission, which is set to be an annual event.

Tell me about the window project.

Well Iniva opened at a new building in Shoreditch last month and as they have a huge window there they had been talk about creating some sort of window project. The idea is that one a year they commission an artist to create an installation. I have created one of the first pieces that will be on show.



Brown sugar: Philomena in front of her installation that explores black women's sexuality

It sounds like quite a prestigious commission.

I am very pleased, it took some time though. Someone from Iniva initially saw my work at my degree show a while back. She had ideas for the window project even then, but there were discussions about how it would actually work in that space.

Tell me about the installation.

It is called *mo'lasses III* and I created it using piped black treacle. It is all a part of the work I have been doing for a while now, looking at the black female body, its representation today and its relationship to colonial history.

I saw the *Brown Sugar series*, sugar and treacle really is your thing isn't it?

For that series I interviewed five

black women about their attitudes to their bodies. Then I selected three of them to use as a base for a piece of art work. Then I created sugar paintings of the women's bodies in three wall hangings made of sack cloth and sugar cane. Like much of my work it was about the black female body, sexuality and how we see ourselves.

Then I started to explore using treacle. It's a much more fluid sub-

stance than sugar, sugar is more rigid. I realised that that not only creating lines with treacle was effective but also that the drips were effective too. The themes that I deal with, like identity and sexuality are not static so this worked well.

You also work as an arts therapist?

I am a psychotherapist and work with children and adults in the field of health. I was once a social worker but decided that was not really what I wanted to be doing. I wanted to explore being an artist so started doing an arts degree part time. The work I do now is great because it combines my love of two things: people and art. Will I continue straddling two careers? For now certainly, it's not like I am bidding my time working in a bakery. Arts therapy is a great medium to help people through difficulties. Maybe the balance will have to be different in the future though. Hopefully I will be creating a lot more of my own work.

■ *Mo'lasses III* is an Iniva commission for the Rivington Place window and will be available to view from the exterior of Rivington Place, Rivington Street from 5 December - 5 January.

Info: www.iniva.org