



Philomena Francis in conversation with Adelaide Bannerman

Adelaide Bannerman: It's Monday 5 November at Rivington Place, I'm here with Philomena Francis at 10.20 am.

Could you give a brief description of your work?

Philomena Francis: I use black treacle as my main material to create my work from. It came out of a piece of work from 2004 that I was doing, I was thinking about black women and sexuality. I was creating these women out of brown sugar after interviewing a series of women about themselves, their bodies, then taking photographs of them, choosing the photographs with them and recreating them out of sugar. I wanted to play on the idea of brown sugar, a term that's used a lot in black vernacular talking about sexuality, female sexuality and 'sweetness', and so on. I wanted to play with those words really, how we use more physical, concrete words to talk about something else. Post-colonial Britain was built on the sugar trade, and so you have that reference to colonialism and obviously beyond that to slavery. The 'sweet tooth' of Europe meant that this trade boomed and 'they' wanted it as cheaply as possible and slavery was part of that, so I like the fact that with one material you can reference so many things without actually having to say them.

AB: So were they paintings then, what did they look like?

PF: They are wall-hangings. I suppose you could call them sugar paintings or sugar collages because obviously I was painting with the sugar. Because sugar is a grainy material, I was mainly putting together different types of sugar: I'd use demerara, then I used soft brown, molasses sugar.

AB: What was the nature of the interviews that you had with the women?

PF: The interviews were really about their relationship with their own bodies, and how they saw themselves as women, their sensuality, sexuality, femininity. What was interesting is that you get quite a range of women who didn't feel very feminine and didn't feel that that was a word they would associate with themselves. They were brave enough to allow me to see them not just undressed, but quite naked, which I think is quite different. We explored how it felt being black in Britain, and female in Britain, and how that influenced how they see themselves as women.

AB: So how were those feelings discussed?

PF: I wanted to give them the feeling that I was listening and I was present, that I wasn't relying on a recording that I'd listen to later, but that we were in the moment and in the conversations at the time. The conversations tended to happen in intimate spaces – most of them were bedrooms – and also they would be undressing, or posing, or just being relaxed in their own skin, while I took photos as we were talked. I tried to keep it all a part of the same experience, rather than lots of potted experiences. So the questions ranged differently in terms of my being there – the next question came out of what was said back to me rather than a standardised questionnaire approach. I wasn't there with this agenda that I was just trying to fill.

AB: So essentially the paintings were portraits? Did these paintings encapsulate those conversations?

PF: My aim was to create an image that encapsulated that process – what happened in that room, the feelings that were expressed at the time. With their permission, the image tended to always be a joint choice, one that we looked at together and they felt comfortable with, and those were the ones I worked on. It is a type of portrait in a way, but because they had no idea quite what was going to happen it kind of takes it away from portraiture in some ways also.

AB: So what was it about that process that led you to the *mo'lasses* series, where this time you are choosing an image from somewhere else, this time the image didn't arise from a conversation. What led you to do this?

PF: That's interesting again. It came out of those interviews and that work, thinking about images that the women themselves had seen, or characters that they'd seen or identified with,



or not. It was through those conversations that the relationship to popular culture came about in terms of what we project and also what we 'introject', what we take back inside ourselves. It seemed like an interesting avenue, this idea of what we're surrounded with every day and what we take inside ourselves. There was a colonialistic kind of mentality coming up in the conversations, as well as the culture of today with images from TV, movies, or from words in songs. So you have all these sorts of influences that were there as part of the experience of becoming a woman, as well as what you felt from inside, and how you responded to them and what was actually facing you as well. It was from those sorts of conversations that I got interested in the idea of looking at some of the images.

AB: There is a sense of flux with those images, about the paintings that you have done and the standpoint that you take when you look at them. They do move around and there is a lot of space around them so that the images either come to the fore or recede back. I'm thinking in light of other artists who I guess stylistically have worked from a similar premise in terms of that kind of abstracted figure. I'm thinking of people like Gary Hume and the Water Paintings of the mid '90s, Ghada Amer whose work you know very well, and someone suggested recently to me Francis Picabia and the Transparency Paintings of the mid 1920s. What do you think of some of these connections that you have to these artists?

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PF: Well as you mention, I look a lot at Amer's work and I like the feeling that you think you know what you're seeing and then you're not sure and then you're surprised. I like the fact that their work challenged you in a way of always playing with the idea of what you're seeing and what you're feeling and responding to. With her work Amer re-appropriates images from 'top-shelf' porn magazines, the lines that she uses with the threads, and the colours and that strong canvas at first would make you think you're looking at some abstract expressionistic work. So again in some ways if you're going to be lazy you will think, 'oh I know what that is', when really you don't. I like the way she can pull you in with that. It's those kinds of qualities that you mentioned in those works that I'd like to create as well in the work that I'm doing. Images are around us all the time so there is a part of us that is quite lazy and we do think that we know what we've seen before we've even really looked at it. You think you're looking at a landscape or trees or something else and then somehow an image of 'that woman' emerges from the work, and that's part of what I like about working with treacle. Also I like the fact that, even though I'm creating the work, I'm not completely in control of it because there are lines created by the forces of gravity with the treacle on the surface. So I'm never totally sure of what the image is going to be. I like the fact it has a life of its own – for me that fits in with my conceptual ideas of the fluidity of who we are, and our identity.

AB: Going back to your thoughts on the way in which we digest images and the messages that miss us, there are people who look into the image and want to know where these images come from. I know that you're keen on not talking specifically about where you select your images from, but what do you say to those people who might recognise where they come from? How does that play into the overall work? Is it more to do with the way they read the work, or what you want to convey?

PF: I don't mind people knowing if they discover it for themselves, that's fine, that's through the process of looking. So some may see the black woman emerge, some might not, and for me that's ok, because it's within their own experience of viewing. Otherwise, if I concretely say that 'this image is from this', then you distort the process of viewing or experiencing the piece of work because you might get the response of, 'ah well I don't get it'. I think that takes away from the experience. That's why I don't put it 'up front' with 'oh this image is from this movie or this photograph' – it's best to allow the person to have the experience themselves.

AB: We're in London, a multi-racial city, you're talking about a woman from a particular culture or racial background, and there have been so many times when people have either contested images of black women or have decided to move them more centrally into the frame, particularly during the 1980s with artists like Sonia Boyce and Claudette Johnson for example. The fact is that you're taking on board the term, 'brown sugar' – in a sense you're still giving it some currency. I'm wondering if you're appropriating the term, how are you making it positive or empowering the image?

PF: In some ways I am re-appropriating from street language, or from music. I remember creating a piece of work and somebody piped up and said, 'oh but black women, they're alright with their bodies and their femininity, look at all those videos' – you know hip-hop videos full of women of all colours gyrating around with very little on. I thought that it was an interesting idea that black women have a relationship with their bodies that isn't complex, you

just put on a bikini and get out there and everything's fine! So in some ways I did want to question it, and explore whether things are as simple as they look. My feelings are that our relationships with our bodies are far more complex. There are so many issues from being on the slave block to the idea of black women being complicit in their own exploitation and degradation because we're so 'over-sexual' anyway. There are so many projections onto the black female body – and the black male body as well, but I happen to be working with the black female – that to be able to simply say that we have a positive relationship with our bodies is missing the point. I remember reading an essay by bell hooks many years back and she was talking about Madonna [*Black Looks*, London: Turnaround, 1982] and how it was alright for her to be able to play with certain aspects of sexuality because she didn't have to deal with those projections.

AB: For her it's masquerading, it's fantasy...

PF: Yes, exactly and a lot of black females find it far more difficult to explore all these projections, the 'hoochie mama', or the 'mammy' who had no sexuality at all and just looks after everybody else. All these ways of being meant that looking at ourselves was a luxury that we couldn't have. The 'bikinis' are another rendition of the 'hoochie mama'. If you watch those videos they look very disconnected, there's nothing about them that's authentic – for these women it's not an expression of anything, it's an exhibition of something. It doesn't feel like it's coming from the inside out. So in some ways, yes, I am exploring those issues, but I also like the idea of creating a black woman in the work – I don't have to tell you, because you can tell by the features and the hair and so on. Even though there is an abstraction, the essence of the black woman is in the work. I am trying to create images that look like they originate from black women rather than the idea of a black woman.

AB: In a sense what you're talking about also relates to the technique and the way in which you work, because you are talking about several different types of images; your mission is to show that there is a more complex view that we have of our bodies, but also in other ways you're shattering illusions about certain types of images which is where you get the fragmentation and abstraction. The figure kind of comes into being and then it recedes again. It kind of mimics those moments when you feel you know yourself very well, and then at other times you're chasing to find out who you are. Just thinking about the particular images that you select, are they reflective of pivotal moments in relation to the circumstances in which they are found, be it films or a particular place? What's the importance of that moment? How do you select that particular image that you're going to rest on?

PF: In the beginning I was thinking a lot about the idea of being active rather than passive, and then how that's defined in terms of an expression or a feeling of being in one's self through an experience. So it was a combination of remembering films that I'd seen when I was younger, that I wasn't supposed to have seen, you know, blaxploitation films – you weren't supposed to see them because they were certified 18 and I wasn't. They were a big deal, on the night you'd be like, 'wow have you seen Foxy Brown?'

AB: My favourite was Cleopatra Jones...

PF: Of course, exactly! There was always this feeling of anticipation. You'd always hear stories of Foxy Brown before you'd even seen the films. In some ways part of that childhood feeling of anticipation of these images, which in those days were so important, was because in those days there weren't that many. In terms of black British films I remember *Black Joy* (1977) – I remember having to stay up really late to the graveyard hours where it was either on BBC2 or ... I don't even think Channel 4 existed yet! Many people have experienced this, if a black person was on the television somebody would yell, 'there's a black person on the television!' and we'd all run down the stairs for the five or six seconds, then they'd be gone!

So it was that kind of starvation that influenced the first images. Blaxploitation movies always featured very active black women, but at the same time they were still a creation of the male fantasy too. So I was trying to look for moments where it felt like they were having an experience outside of themselves, so it could be a sexual experience, or something that gets you outside of yourself but in touch with yourself at the same time, and those were the moments I was looking for. For *mo'lasses III*, because the piece of work is going to be placed in the window, I wanted to work with the idea of the window too, so the image would present the idea of being looked at or being viewed but you're not supposed to know you're being looked at. The image that I picked to work with for this piece was one in which the character is supposed to be asleep, but there is something about the pose that has a self-consciousness to it,



as if there is part of her that knows that she's being watched. I liked the ambiguity of that. And we're working with a window, windows call people to look into them, so I wanted to work with an image that asked, 'Am I calling you to look at me, or not?' or 'Do I know you're looking at me or not?', which is again within the realm of sleep in which we get in touch with what goes on inside us. So that was why I was playing with the image I have now, and again it was an image in which a black character from a French film had the look of our mums, our older sisters – she didn't look like the idea of what you had to look like to be a black actress on television, again someone else's fantasy. There was something quite real about the look of this character, her behaviour.

AB: Were there certain characteristics or mannerisms that you recognised?

PF: Yes. Even though this was a black African French woman, the familiarity between how she spoke to her children, reminded me of my own mother in some ways – there was that kind of ambivalent 'crossness' that would be there in my own mother. Also the fact that she was disarmed at this moment – there's a beauty and at the same time a self-consciousness there, as if she has to be watchful even whilst sleeping.

AB: I think it's interesting that you use those very particular moments that are ambiguous to reconcile the views of the spectator and how the image could be returning those looks back; those different states of being that you referred to within the painting.

PF: I like to represent that ambiguity because the areas that I'm exploring are ambiguous and ambivalent as well, sometimes contentious.

AB: How does 'site' feed into the work?

PF: Here at Rivington Place, the space was new and I was thinking about where we are, the fact that we're in an area where there's a lot of emerging art, clubs, the bars...

AB: You're in close proximity to the City and the migrant histories of the East End...

PF: East End trade in terms of materials and the rag-trade. Also it's an area where there's a lot of poverty as well as prostitution, vice. I was kind of thinking about all those sorts of issues, but also thinking about this new building based on the 'mask', and so this idea of what's seen, what isn't seen, all these sorts of associations I was thinking about.