

LAST YEARZ INTERESTING NEGRO

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i ride in colour and soft focus,
no longer anywhere

SUN 17/03 20:30

PERFORMANCE / DANCE | 1H30

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IN CONVERSATION WITH LAST YEARZ INTERESTING NEGRO

Written by Nkenna Akunna (Skin Deep Magazine, 25/06/18)

At London's Block Universe Performance Art Festival, Jamila Johnson-Small – who works under the name Last Yearz Interesting Negro – moved through the crowd in a manner both stilted and sensual, emitting a pulsating kind of power that was simultaneously contained and emanating. It was a performance I was glad to be able to experience and be a part of. In a short discussion via email, Johnson-Small shared some of her thoughts with me. The conversation has been lightly edited.

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Can you tell me what kind of ideas you were playing with in your performance at Block Universe?

Lots of ideas!?

Admittedly, that is a very broad question.

I mean, I have been continuing threads that have been running through my practice for a long while but maybe for this work in particular, things that kept coming up were around excess, spillage, overflow, the potential power of surrender, vulnerability and access, overwhelm as a bodily thing – fleshy, sensual, hot, wet, textured, pleasure-giving, rather than an internal mental landscape which is more what I had been working on/with. I was thinking/feeling about consent, accountability, our interconnectedness and distinction in the face of those moments of overflow.

This is the first of your performances that I have been to, and I was hooked by the ways you co-existed with the audience. It sometimes looked like there was a forcefield around you, creating the space for whatever your body needed in

that moment, and watching that space ripple along with you. And with your microphone cord. It was an extremely powerful thing to see. Can you talk a bit about your relationship with your audience?

My work needs an audience to exist; they are a crucial part of the energetic and physical environment, and are the bodies that will receive (or we could say construct) whatever I am offering/ revealing/sharing/giving. Navigating 'the gaze' – and I do not mean this as something singular – is survival work that all 'othered' bodies are obliged to do. As a black woman born and raised in a majority white country with a 'history' of Empire, I am always aware of my audience, I have to be, and within my work I try to make space to have different kinds of relations because it is temporarily my house, my church, my empire – a certain kind of fragile, unknown and precarious sanctuary. I am super interested in the multiple levels through which we communicate being allowed to come into focus in dance and live performance, [given that] in most social interactions language and words are often privileged.

My engaging with movement requires a focused and particular kind of mental translation, you know, in interpreting what it is your body in that space with all those other bodies, was saying to me. In some moments you were rendered in almost a deified light, in others you seemed much more vulnerable. For me, this spoke to the often oscillating nature with which 'othered' bodies relate to 'the gaze'. As you say, it is something we can not help but be conscious of. Do you anticipate who your audiences might be/how they might interact with your body?

I try not to anticipate how the audience might respond to me, more to cultivate a space that invites something – an atmosphere, an intimacy – and then I respond in the performances (which all work with improvisation) to the ways in which the different audiences choose to interact. I am interested in thinking about performance as a

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live encounter of different elements that unfolds over time; as a situation of exchange of energies and stream-flows of information/references/histories, where myself as 'the performer' is not always at the centre, but it becomes clear that we are all players as we observe the shifts and movement of power in the space.

I was blown away by the lighting in the show, both the colours used and the angles at which you were lit. Can you talk about your lighting, and what you hoped to project through those decisions?

For the lighting in several works now (i ride in colour and soft focus, no longer anywhere; BASICTENSION; FuryZ) I have been working with a lighting designer named Jackie Shemesh. We discuss themes and intentions (emotional, aesthetic, energetic, rhythmic) for the work, Jackie constructs a palette, and we run the performances, both improvising and refining our decisions in relation to the movement (which is in turn taking shape in relation to the light environment), as the work starts to reveal itself. I really enjoy that this, too, is an unknown, unfixed, always shifting element of the work and that it is live, with me, so I am both centred and not, knowing and unknowing...

What do you hope to get across to your audience through your movement and overall performance?

This is a big – or maybe I should say – broad question!

Sorry.

I have a movement practice that I consider increasingly intimate and there are different things I am working on / through / with there, but the agenda is not to communicate anything directly through that moving. I guess I am keen to use dance as a situation or physical state that

can destabilise, re-direct, fracture and fragment patterns of thought through an engagement with internal systems and cycles and an acknowledgement of constant (ex)change and influence and the non-linear, non-chronological unfolding experience of living actually. For both a person moving and a person observing that moving. So maybe you could say that dancing is something I work with to attempt to both extract myself and commune with... here I am talking about structures, across multiple scales, micro to macro, internal, external.

There are of course more specific things I am working with but I am not sure that I find them relevant to talk about because whatever is transmitted or created between myself and each person who comes to see a performance is the thing. I am exploring and experimenting and searching myself, trying to learn through these encounters, I don't know myself many of the things or meanings I might be proposing... Part of the work for me is about contributing to, or starting a conversation, I am interested in how we see and what we see and that this is always revealing.

CREDITS

CONCEPT, CHOREOGRAPHY AND PERFORMANCE Jamila Johnson-Small | **MUSIC** Phoebe Collings-James, Josh Anio Grigg, Jamila Johnson-Small, Junior XL, Nkisi, Shelley Parker | **LIGHTING DESIGN** Jackie Shemesh | **SOUND DESIGN** Josh Anio Grigg | **SCULPTURE** Joey Addison | **VIDEO** Jamila Johnson-Small & David Panos