



Art as a catalyst for change

Dr Sarah Plumb

Supported by

ual: decolonising
arts institute



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

 **Freelands
Foundation**

20/20 is an ambitious three-year programme that engaged 20 emerging or mid-career ethnically diverse artists of colour and 20 public art collections across the UK, resulting in 20 new permanent acquisitions.

Generously supported by Arts Council England, Freelands Foundation and UAL, 20/20 combined artist residencies and commissioning at scale, with the aim of catalysing artists' careers and fostering meaningful change in collections - not only through the artworks that will ultimately enter the collections but also through a peer network of artists and curators, and the critical interrogation of collections practices.

Christopher Samuel's beautifully subversive, witty and multifaceted socially engaged practice is deeply rooted in his personal experiences as a Black, working class, disabled man, impacted by inequality, marginalisation and deeply discriminatory systems and structures.¹ With a profound understanding of identity and disability politics and an astute ability to make the invisible visible, the unseen seen, Samuel's inclusive methods and approaches intend to foster empathy and enable others to 'identify and relate to a wider spectrum of human experience'.²

For his 20/20 residency with Birmingham Museums Trust, Samuel researched the Trust's collection, archives, records and stores to explore how Black, disabled, working-class voices were (and are), heard and recorded, investigating whose histories are missing, and questioning why some people's lives are perceived as less valuable and therefore less worthy of recording for posterity. He found very little material that represented disabled experiences, with the majority charitable artefacts relating to injured servicemen or personnel, depicting a colonial and ableist voice of pity.³ And, perhaps unsurprisingly, no works of, or by, Black disabled people.⁴

Addressing the absence of these voices in Birmingham Museums Trust's collections, he set out to develop a broader and more inclusive archive of his own, building on his autobiographical work, first shown at the Wellcome Collection in 2022, 'The Archive of An Unseen'.⁵ To build the archive, Samuel worked with Birmingham Museums Trust and Birmingham-based charities and organisations, seeking out Black disabled people who would share their experiences through oral histories and personal documentation. Initially he struggled to recruit participants through a series of open calls, which perhaps reveals myriad complex issues faced by disabled people such as a lack of access to services and provision, the incompatibility between service provision and complex lives, a distrust of these services, and, more specifically, the ongoing legacy of shame and stigma associated with the Black disabled experience – 'an experience which is often invisible or hidden away'.⁶ However, as he continued to reach out over a six-month period, he connected with over 70 people, eight of whom became more deeply involved and participated through in-depth interviews.

Samuel's process of collaborating with individuals to collect and amplify their stories and histories – handled with an empathy and sensitivity that betrays his background as a counsellor – confirmed his suspicions that:

A lot of disabled people do not feel comfortable talking about their experience. Because, for one, they've not spoken about it before in this way, and in this depth, the good and the bad, and the ramifications of them doing that in a public space. Disability is not spoken about within the community in this way, it's a taboo subject.⁷

Through the in-depth process of meeting and interviewing others who had faced similar experiences of discrimination and marginalisation, Samuel started to further reflect on his personal experiences and complex relationship with faith and disability:

There's always been an unspoken tension between disability, faith and culture, and particularly within the context of the black community. I've found there's been shame within the community, and I've personally dealt with not being included in certain things. Attitudes towards disability were problematic for me as a child, for instance I should be grateful that someone wants to pray for me to be healed, or being told that my disability is because I was a bad person in a different life. Or being told that if I believe in Jesus, I will be able to walk.

So, there's always been a real tension for me, but, through speaking with others and making connections within the community, I realised actually it wasn't all in my head. It was quite dangerous and damaging as a kid for me. It made me want to be fixed or resentful of my disability and it strained my relationship with faith. But I still do believe, I just don't believe in the way they believe I should believe in God.⁸

Samuel, who works in a variety of media and is led by the materials and concepts he explores when thinking about what form the work will take, will show a stained-glass artwork for his commissioned piece at Birmingham Museums Trust, alongside the new oral histories and collected artefacts, which will all become part of the permanent collection. Utilising a medium wholly associated with religion and worship, the sumptuous work depicts a messiah-like figure, surrounded by beams of light and worshippers looking on in awe. And yet, Samuel cleverly subverts the traditional religious iconography by presenting the central icon as a Black disabled man using a wheelchair. All the figures appear in pure black, amplifying 'Blackness' and reminiscent of approaches by other contemporary Black figurative artists, such as Kerry James Marshall and Amy Sherald's 'investigations into the chromatics of representation ... [which] bends traditional methodology to the contemporary interrogation of identity'.⁹ Historically, and across Western culture, representations of the Black figure have often been limited to certain tropes and stereotypes, and 'are frequently imagined to signify something other than themselves'.¹⁰ Furthermore, individual subjects might have been given little control over the ways in which they were represented. Relatedly, disabled people were frequently exploited as a device in artworks for the non-disabled gaze and to represent the goodness and godliness of praying for the disabled person to be healed or cured.¹¹ In Samuel's work 'Pray for Me', these well-established and deeply problematic tropes are disrupted, with the audience prompted to ask: who is saving whom?

Cultural institutions have too often overlooked or chosen to silence the voices, stories and rich lives of disabled people and people of colour. Where Black and disabled lives do appear, they are habitually portrayed in ways that reflect deeply held negative attitudes or are othered for the white, non-disabled gaze.¹² These unconscious (and in some cases conscious) approaches reveal an exclusionary and elitist attitude that sits uncomfortably with twenty-first-century approaches to social justice, rights, equity and respect.

The absence of artworks by and about people of colour and disabled people, means that cultural institutions continually present collections that erase the lives of vast swathes of society. Where collections do represent diversity, they often reproduce untruths, leaving little room for understanding, compassion or human connection.¹³ As Samuel so powerfully asserts: 'if you don't see yourself reflected in cultural spaces, it suggests that those spaces are not for you'.¹⁴

Samuel describes himself as an 'agitator' who sets out 'to push open a little space that isn't there' and create opportunities for disabled and Black voices and stories to be heard loud and clear.¹⁵ His singular and sophisticated artistic practice builds on a legacy of decolonial and activist work that agitates with, and advocates on behalf of, racialised and minoritised groups, provokes audiences to question established ideas and entrenched narratives, challenge stigma and rethink the ways in which society values marginalised people.¹⁶ Through the 20/20 commission and the acquisition of 'Pray for Me' by Birmingham Museums Trust, Samuel aims 'to have an impact and to normalise difference, which also benefits everyone', utilising the privileged power of cultural institutions like Birmingham Museums Trust and acknowledging their roles as 'public guardians of our culture, of high value and that represent us all', in order to enable 'these often elite and exclusionary spaces to become spaces for everyone'.¹⁷

Endnotes

- ¹ Christopher Samuel, 'About', artist website, <https://www.christophersamuel.co.uk/about-info>.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Christopher Samuel, conversation with the author, 1 August 2024.
- ⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵ Christopher Samuel, 'Projects – The Archive of An Unseen', artist webpage, <https://www.christophersamuel.co.uk/projects/the-archive-of-an-unseen>.
- ⁶ Samuel, conversation, 2024.
- ⁷ Ibid.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Ekow Eshun, 'Introduction', in 'The Time is Always Now: Artists Reframe the Black Figure', exhibition catalogue, National Portrait Gallery, London, 2024, p.16.
- ¹⁰ Ibid., p.11.
- ¹¹ See also, the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries at the University of Leicester, experimental collaborative action research with Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery – 'Talking About... Disability and Art', 2006–8, part of 'Rethinking Disability Representation', <https://le.ac.uk/rcmg/research-archive/rethinking-disability-representation>; and Suzanne MacLeod, 'Talking About... Disability and Art, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, UK, 2006–8', in 'Museums and Design for Creative Lives', Routledge, London, 2020, pp.272–81.
- ¹² Richard Sandell, 'Disability: Museums and Our Understandings of Difference', in 'The Contemporary Museum: Shaping Museums for the Global Now, Routledge', Oxfordshire, 2019; RCMG, 'An Ethical Approach to Interpreting Disability and Difference', RCMG and Wellcome Collection, 2020, <https://le.ac.uk/-/media/uol/docs/research-centres/rcmg/publications/an-ethical-approach-to-interpreting-disability-and-difference.pdf>; RCMG, 'Everywhere and Nowhere: Guidance for Ethically Researching and Interpreting Disability Histories', RCMG and National Trust, 2023, <https://le.ac.uk/-/media/uol/docs/research-centres/rcmg/publications/everywhere-and-nowhere-guidance-final.pdf>.

¹³ RCMG, 'Revealing previously untold stories of disability', Everywhere and Nowhere, <https://everywhereandnowhere.le.ac.uk/about/>.

¹⁴ Samuel, conversation, 2024.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Katy Bunning, Isabel Collazos Gottret, Cesare Cuzzola, Suzanne MacLeod, Sarah Plumb and Richard Sandell, 'Contested Desires: Constructive Dialogues – Background Research Report', RCMG and Contested Desires, 2024, <https://le.ac.uk/-/media/uol/docs/research-centres/rcmg/d51-background-research-report-for-rcmg-website.pdf>.

¹⁷ Samuel, conversation, 2024.

<https://2020.arts.ac.uk/>

ual: decolonising
arts institute

Supported by



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

 **Freelands
Foundation**