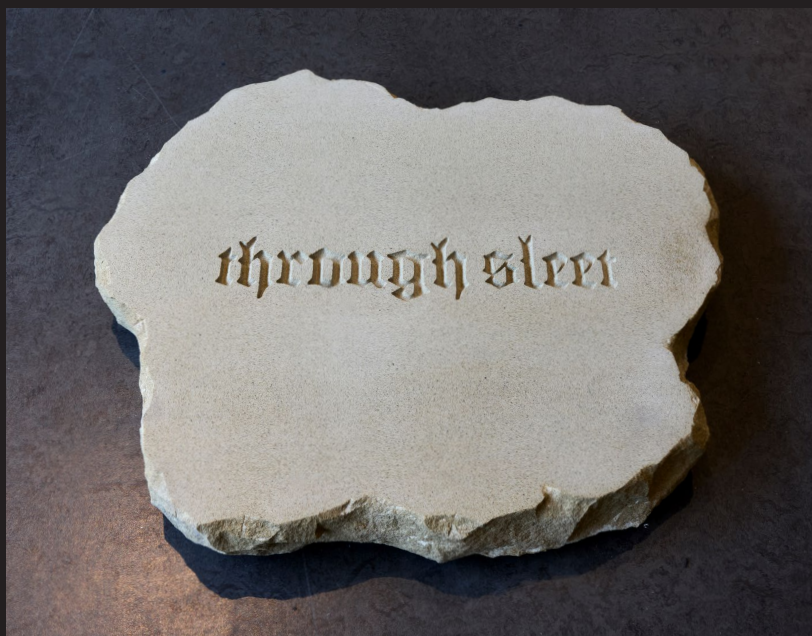


Communion

Leah Hickey,
Jamal Lloyd Davis,
Tomilola Olumide

8 August — 17 November 2024



Exhibition guide

The New Art Gallery Walsall is delighted to be working in partnership with Multistory to present *Communion*. Initiated as part of Multistory's artist development programme, Blast Creative Network (BCN), this opportunity sits under the Assembly programme strand, which supports and platforms emerging artists in Sandwell and the Black Country through an annual exhibition.

In our first year of partnering on this project, we have worked with artists Leah Hickey, Jamal Lloyd Davis and Tomilola Olumide, supporting their creative and professional development as well as commissioning new work. The title of the exhibition, *Communion*, stems from overarching themes in the artists' work that relate to being in communion with oneself and others, sharing intimate space and the re-contextualisation of faith. The artists share an interest in text and language as an essential component of their work and these can be found woven throughout the exhibition.

Leah Hickey

Leah Hickey draws on English Romantic poetry and auto-fiction to create rhythmic verse, typographic painting and gravestones. Her work is influenced by classical American cinema, performative femininity and Christian and Druidic traditions surrounding death. Leah is interested in stone with regard to ritual and memory, as well as the crafts of stonemasonry and engraving. For *Communion*, Leah has collaborated with local Tipton based stonemason Ryan Jackson to develop new work as part of her ongoing series *Offering*.

The *Offering* series was made in direct response to the artist losing her father. Seeking meaning in grief, Leah was drawn to alleged family lineage; she had been told she comes from a 'line of Druids' a sect that existed throughout ancient England, Ireland and Northern Europe who, amongst other things, conducted ritual sacrifices and made offerings to God in bodies of water. Bodies of water, like rivers and lakes, were regarded as a passage to the heavens, and items like precious metals and gemstones were deposited as offerings. Central to the installation is a new body of work, a triptych entitled *Offering* (2024, hand-cut engraving on sandstone), which contains lines from a free-verse Romantic poem the artist wrote the year of her father's death. This triptych represents three stepping stones, which lead a path to Heaven.

The second work presented by Leah, *Talisman* (2024, UV print on matte vinyl) marks a movement towards making smaller and more intimate, handheld objects. The vinyl bumper sticker, a banal, everyday and mass-produced object, acts as a contemporary token of faith. Following her father's death, Leah has been finding herself reassessing her relationship to faith, and coming to terms with what God is, and what God means to her. This work maladapted biblical verse into colloquial phrasing, as a form of protection and to ward off evil. Alongside the triptych, *Talisman* also incorporates Gutenberg, the earliest known Blackletter typeface which dates to 15th century Europe. The work was influenced by an encounter with a stranger, whose entire rear of their car was covered with vinyl stickers lamenting their own grief; one being an infinity symbol, and another reading 'MY DAD WILL ALWAYS BE WITH ME'.

For this exhibition, Leah also presents *Private View*, (2023, oil on satin) the artist's most recent painting. This work was made in response to gender-based harassment the artist had experienced within a gallery setting and reflects on how some men are able to freely operate in public space without fear of repercussion. Satin is used in lieu of silk, a more premium and organic fabric. Oil paint was used consciously as a medium which stains or mars the fabric which it touches. As the satin is untreated, this allows the oil to separate from the black pigment and bleed out into the fabric, alluding to blood-stained bed sheets, soiled clothing and tear-stained tissues.

About Leah:

Leah Hickey (Walsall, UK) is an artist led by heartache. Leah uses English Romantic poetry and auto-fiction as a starting point for rhythmic verse, typographic painting and gravestones. The artist's work is influenced by classical American cinematography, performative femininity, and Christian

and Druidic ritual surrounding death. Leah currently produces *Emotional Outbursts*, a 'part-fact, part-fiction otherworld of love letters' that merges free verse poetry and Early Modern English language with contextual research, which has manifested in print form. Leah also co-directs Prayer Room, an artist-led gallery in Birmingham, UK, and recently founded Tentative Press.

Jamal Lloyd Davis

Jamal Lloyd Davis is a photographer and filmmaker who explores the nuances of the human experience. He is interested in portraiture and observations of the everyday. His experimentation with both text and the colour blue allude to his interest in raising awareness of mental health issues, particularly within the Black community. For *Communion*, Jamal produced a new series of works entitled *black-and-blue*, that directly reference work by the artists who have deeply inspired him, in order to pay homage to those that have come before him. *black-and-blue* includes visual references to BLK Art Group founding member Keith Piper's drawing, *Body Type 1*, which uses text and portraiture to critique the objectification of Black men's bodies, and Clarissa Sligh's use of cyanotype printing, along with her series *Reframing the Past*, where the artist revisited her own family album and childhood.

As an artist, Jamal's work has been shaped by his struggle with anxiety. Threads that inform the works include the language used around mental health - "feeling blue" - the origins of the genre of Blues music, the role of religion within historical trauma, systemic inequalities and cultural stigmas. While Jamal's surroundings and other people have previously been the subjects of his work, for this exhibition, Jamal chose to turn the camera upon himself for the first time, presenting a new series of self-portraits that intimately explore his own experiences with anxiety. The artist creates a contrast between the distanced, staged self-portrait and the series of cyanotypes, to explore the deep vulnerability of revealing oneself and of being in front of a camera. Submerged in blue, the cyanotype self-portraits envelop the artist's image in a soft haze, indicating a tenderness and act of self-care. The choice of cyanotype as a material, which uses sunlight exposure,



Jamal Lloyd Davis, *black-and-blue*, 2024. Cyanotype. Courtesy the artist. Photo Jess Piette.

critiques often complacent well-being advice which recommends getting sunlight as a quick fix for mental health issues. For Jamal, the meditative act of washing the print and the use of water to reveal the final image, has connotations with revealing your true self, and a baptism; the promise of starting anew.

About Jamal:

Jamal Lloyd Davis is a British-Jamaican photographer and filmmaker with a practice centring on the complex

and enigmatic realms of Black identity; specifically, focusing on themes such as mental health. Jamal's work explores community and their surroundings, and comments on the societal constructs that try to limit and define it while embarking on a continuous journey of experimental techniques. He is also a member of Extra Ordinary People and part of the REFLECTOR cohort run by Grain Projects. Previous work has been shown at Vivid Projects, Dreamy Place, Factory International and Southbank Centre.

Tomilola Olumide

Tomilola Olumide is a Nigerian multidisciplinary artist who often draws on materials and memories from her childhood in Lagos. In her new work, *Chronicles of Respite*, the artist explores the importance of rest and self-preservation. Acts of joy and play, and a call to remain present in life's daily routines thread throughout the series, which spans across poetry, textiles and metal work. Tomilola chooses to rest in activity that is whimsical and joyous rather than in stillness. Through internal conversations between her younger and present selves she has engaged in spontaneous productions of work that focus on the act of making.

The process of experimentation and play are important aspects of Tomilola's practice, and the artist approaches her use of material equally playfully, having used the commission to explore new materials and ways of creating work. Her poems are printed onto polyester fabric through sublimation printing, using hydro-printed designs as the background image, which were previously made in her Lagos studio in 2022. In her Batik fabric pieces series *Erekere* (2024, canvas fabric, wax, fabric dye), the artist restages joyful memories of play from when she was a child, where she enjoyed 'hand printing' with paint. 'Erekere' is a Yoruba word which means 'reckless play', which the artist enacted through hand outlines and batik techniques. Her series *Passages* (2024, enamel powder and copper

plates), was created through wet and dry enamel curing processes heated in a kiln. This body of work includes drawings and symbols that allude to mundane passages of activity that lead to rest.

In her series of poems, *Choosing Self, Reckonings of Joy and Slow down*, (2023-2024), Tomilola explores self-preservation, prioritising rest, joy, situational happiness and God's constant intervention. The poems are a call for 'revolutionary' self-love and respite, and a rejection of the pressure to always be productive. The meditative and tender tone of the poems and the use of repetition reference the act of prayer, demonstrating the power of language and voice to speak new truths into being.

In *Slow Down*, she writes;

*"Rest your bones, sit them down,
normalise the ability to prioritise
Tell yourself
Worthy am !!
Worthy am !!*

Slow downnnnnn."

About Tomilola Olumide

Tomilola Olumide is a multidisciplinary artist based in the Black Country. Tomilola's work is inspired by her upbringing in Lagos, Nigeria and her navigation of life in adulthood. She works across a wide range of materials from found objects, personal memorabilia and sculpture to textiles,



Tomilola Olumide, *Passages*, 2024. Enamel powder and copper plates. Courtesy the artist. Photo David Rowan.

often using her own body as a medium to explore tactile memory, intimacy and sensuality. Tomilola is the recipient of the Sir Frank Bowling Fellowship award for her postgraduate study at the Royal College of Art, London, 2024. Her recent projects include *Immersive Arts Bootcamp: Unreal Engine 5*, BOM,

(2024), Studio Maker Programme at STEAMhouse, Birmingham (2024), *Wa wø | Spot VR Residency* at Stryx Gallery (2023), *Pressure x Walk | (Algo)Afro Futures*, Vivid Projects (2023), *Moving to Words*, Eastside Projects (2023).

EVENTS

In Conversation

Saturday, 9 November, 2pm

Join all three artists for an informal introduction to their work.

Free, please book at the The New Art Gallery Walsall's Reception Desk or through Eventbrite.

For updates on the exhibition, please visit The New Art Gallery Walsall's webpage.

ABOUT BCN

Multistory is a community arts organisation based in the borough of Sandwell and the people and place shape our work. Our programme of participatory arts projects, workshops, talks and events takes place in libraries, community centres and indoor and outdoor public spaces and is produced with, and by, artists and communities living in Sandwell. Multistory's BCN artist development programme offers artists and creatives who are based in Sandwell and the Black Country a free annual programme of talks, workshops and social events and is a space for mutual support and knowledge sharing. The programme offers yearly commissions, through open calls, including five studio based residencies with an end-of-residency group exhibition; a journal of new art writing; and a group exhibition of newly commissioned work.



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