

LUKE WILLIS
THOMPSON

AT

CHISENHOLE

23 JUNE - 27 AUGUST 2017

LUKE WILLIS THOMPSON

'AUTOPORTRAIT'

Chisenhale Gallery presents a new commission and the first solo exhibition in a UK institution by Luke Willis Thompson.

Thompson presents a portrait of Diamond Reynolds. In July 2016, Reynolds broadcast, via Facebook Live, the moments immediately after the fatal shooting of her partner Philando Castile by a police officer during a traffic-stop in Minnesota, United States. Reynolds' video circulated widely online and amassed over six million views.

In November 2016, with the assistance of Chisenhale Gallery, Thompson established a conversation with Reynolds, and her lawyer, and invited Reynolds to work with him on the production of an artwork. Thompson proposed to make an aesthetic response that could act as a 'sister-image' to Reynolds' video broadcast. Thompson and Reynolds agreed to produce a film together, to be presented in London, and which would break with the well-known image of Reynolds, caught in a moment of violence and distributed within a constant flow of news.

autoprotrait was produced in April 2017. It is a silent portrait of Reynolds shot on 35mm, black and white film and presented here in the gallery as a single screen work.

Thompson's portrait of Reynolds builds on research made throughout his *Chisenhale Gallery Create Residency* (2016-17), which began with an exploration into the history of the riots in London in 1981 and 2011. The *Chisenhale Gallery Create Residency* is an 18-month artists' residency produced in partnership with Create.

Thompson's exhibition continues the gallery's programme for 2017, which includes new commissions by artists Alex Baczynski-Jenkins, Maeve Brennan and Hannah Black. Through the work, Thompson raises questions about representation and the body as site of political enquiry, themes which recur throughout Chisenhale Gallery's 2017 commissions programme.

Luke Willis Thompson (b. 1988 Auckland) lives and works in London. Thompson often situates his work outside of the gallery, connecting audiences directly with his chosen social context. For his 2015 commission for the New Museum Triennial for example, Thompson worked with a cast of performers, or guides, who led visitors away from the museum to locations throughout New York City that resonate

as sites of racial tension. Through his work, Thompson challenges expectations of the exhibition experience. Audience members often encounter an uneasy exchange with the work, and are invited to consider their own position in relation to Thompson's subject matter, which raises questions around both personal and political agency.

Selected solo exhibitions include *Cemetery of Uniforms and Liveries*, Galerie Nagel Draxler, Berlin; *Sucu Mate/Born Dead*, Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland; and *Misadventure*, IMA, Brisbane (all 2016). Recent group exhibitions include the São Paulo Biennale and Montréal Biennale (both 2016); Asia Pacific Triennial, Queensland Art Museum, Queensland; and *Surround Audience*, New Museum Triennial, New York (both 2015). Thompson was awarded the Walters' Prize in 2014.

Luke Willis Thompson was the *Chisenhale Gallery Create Residency* artist (2016-17). Thompson's portrait of Diamond Reynolds builds on research he has made throughout his residency period, which began with an exploration into the history of the riots in London in 1981 and 2011. Thompson's new commission reflects his ongoing enquiry into questions of race, class and social inequality. In his recent moving image work, *Cemetery of Uniforms and Liveries* (2016) also produced during the *Chisenhale Gallery Create Residency*, Thompson created filmed portraits of two young men from London whose maternal relatives were victims of police brutality.

Chisenhale Gallery Create Residency is an 18-month artists' residency produced in collaboration with Create. The partnership with Create reflects mutual interests in commissioning artists to engage with Chisenhale Gallery's location in East London and its varied social and cultural contexts. For the inaugural *Chisenhale Gallery Create Residency* (2012-14) artist Edward Thomasson worked with a group of performers from East London to produce two new works. Yuri Pattison was the *Chisenhale Gallery Create Residency* artist (2014-16), and produced a new work in response to East London's Tech City.

Create exists to explore the ways artists can contribute to the lives of people in cities. As an organisation Create helps artists to connect more closely with communities through an ambitious programme of projects, and their work is primarily focused on East London.

LIST OF WORKS

autoportrait, 2017

35mm Kodak Eastman Double-X BW (8' 50''@24fps)

Director of Photography

Mhairi-Clare Fitzpatrick

Film and Lighting Technician

Miranda Langevin

Project Liaison

Sara Cluggish

Commissioned and produced by Chisenhale Gallery.

TALKS & EVENTS

As part of the commissioning process, a programme of discursive events has been devised in collaboration with Luke Willis Thompson, including talks at the gallery and offsite events at local schools and partner organisations.

Saturday 24 June, 2pm

Luke Willis Thompson and Polly Staple, Director of Chisenhale Gallery, discuss Thompson's new commission.

Friday 30 June, 9 – 10.30am

An early morning viewing of Luke Willis Thompson's exhibition, *autoprotrait*, with an introduction by Ellen Greig, Exhibitions and Events Curator at Chisenhale Gallery. Coffee and cakes are generously provided by the East End Women's Institute.

Saturday 15 July, 2pm

Orit Gat responds to Luke Willis Thompson's new commission, discussing the difference between photo, image and event, and reflecting on the anxiety of sharing. Gat is a writer on contemporary art and digital culture and contributing editor of *The White Review*.

Thursday 27 July, 7pm

Selected and introduced by Luke Willis Thompson, a screening of *Portrait of Jason* (Shirley Clarke, 1967) is presented in association with MUBI. Jason Holliday was a brilliant figure from the New York underground, rumoured to have sat for a Warhol screen test, which has since been lost. Clarke's film, shot on 16mm black and white film, is composed of non-linear takes, in which Holliday, prompted by the director, recounts and performs episodes of his life for the camera. Thompson sees the strength of the film embodied in Holliday who, despite being exposed to a sense of racism and homophobia from Clarke and her crew, has an ability to evade being fixed by the set-up in one particular rendering. The result is an ambiguous exchange, one which questions who is really being portrayed and who is being undone by this filmed situation. MUBI is an online, curated cinema offering Chisenhale audiences a month free at: mubi.com/Chisenhale.

Wednesday 9 August, 5.30 – 7pm

Luke Willis Thompson is joined by the Mile End Community Project – an organisation working with young people on film, art and media projects – to share their work and methods of production. This event forms part of *Stop Play Record*, a three-year programme for young people aged 16-24 years who are interested in experimental film. To find out more about *Stop Play Record* and watch recent film commissions, please visit the gallery website.

Thursday 17 August, 7pm

Tavia Nyong'o, Professor of African American Studies, America Studies and Theatre Studies at Yale University joins Luke Willis Thompson to discuss Thompson's new commission. Nyong'o reflects on how image production, rather than providing evidence of antiblack violence leading to justice, seems to produce its own economies of suffering and degradation.

FIRST THURSDAYS

In conjunction with late night gallery openings across East London, during exhibitions Chisenhale Gallery is open until 9pm on the first Thursday of each month. Evening events, including introductions by curatorial staff, are programmed in association with First Thursdays.

Thursday 6 July, 7pm

Peter Shand, Head of School, Elam School of Fine Arts, The University of Auckland, discusses Luke Willis Thompson's new commission in relation to his wider practice.

Thursday 3 August, 7pm

Emma Moore, Offsite and Education Curator at Chisenhale Gallery, gives an introduction to Luke Willis Thompson's exhibition, *autoportrait*.

All events are free to attend, unless otherwise stated, but booking is strongly advised. Please visit chisenhale.eventbrite.co.uk or ask at the front desk to make a reservation.

BSL interpretation for events at Chisenhale Gallery is available on request. Please contact rachael.baskeyfield@chisenhale.org.uk for further information. Please be advised that two weeks' notice is required in order to confirm an interpreter.

INTERVIEW WITH LUKE WILLIS THOMPSON

Emma Moore: You relocated to London in February 2016 to participate in the Chisenhale Gallery Create Residency. The residency supports artists to research and produce new work in response to East London, its varied social and cultural contexts and communities. Would you like to talk about the residency and how it has informed the new body of work you have produced?

Luke Willis Thompson: When I arrived in London, I wanted to look at the riots that took place in 2011. In the last 10 or so years, I have been following riots that are triggered by the killing of a person of colour by police. These riots have occurred in a number of Western cities: London, Ferguson, Paris, Sydney, to name just a few. I felt arriving here, around the five-year anniversary of the 2011 riots, that there might be something new to say about that. Truthfully, I never got very far. Artistic research rarely means a straight line of enquiry. While looking into the Chisenhale Gallery archive I became fascinated by Donald Rodney's 1989 exhibition, *Crisis*. Rodney, who lived with sickle cell anemia, often considered his own illness as a metaphor for black life in Britain. His Chisenhale show featured a number of panelled paintings, one of which depicted a figure in the manner of a religious icon painting. The literature for the exhibition named this figure as Dorothy 'Cherry' Groce. So before I even got to the riots of 2011, its precedents interrupted me.

EM: Would you like to say who Dorothy 'Cherry' Groce was?

LWT: She was a woman who lived in Brixton, who had moved to London from Jamaica, and became very much part of the Afro-Caribbean, the black British, community in Brixton. The police raided what they understood to be a squat but was actually Cherry Groce's family home. During the raid, Cherry Groce was shot. News of the shooting spread and it became the catalyst for protests, which were insufficiently addressed by the state and escalated into a riot. The riot is now understood to be largely in response to how the police were treating people of colour in Brixton, and the perceived value of black life in the UK more broadly. The riot lasted two or three days. That was in 1985 and it was the second major riot in South London in five years.

I was fortunate to meet Cherry Groce's son, Lee, who was there at the time of the shooting and lives with the memory of it. I started a conversation with him and he suggested that I meet his son, Brandon, who is Cherry Groce's grandson. Shortly after meeting, Brandon agreed to work with me to produce a portrait.

At the same time, I was looking into other stories of black women who had been killed by the state in London. I was watching the films of Ken Fero, a filmmaker and activist based in London who has produced a wealth of documentaries about deaths in police custody. We established a dialogue and a friendship, and through that I learnt the story of Joy Gardner. Joy Gardner was suffocated by police officers in 1993. Again, this happened in her home. I met with Joy Gardner's son, Graeme, and from our conversation, he also agreed to make a portrait with me.

The portraits of Brandon and Graeme were combined to create the first work I produced during the residency, *Cemetery of Uniforms and Liveries* (2016). The work is two 16mm, black and white, silent portraits of these two young men from London, who themselves were representing their maternal ancestors who were killed by the Metropolitan Police. Both young men sit for the duration of one hundred-feet of film, simply looking into the camera. Their portraits play one after the other on a loop.

EM: Why did you choose to shoot the work on 16mm film?

LWT: I had been very entranced by Andy Warhol's *Screen Tests* (1964-66) and reproduced the exact technical specifications of the *Screen Tests* when I filmed Brandon and Graeme. I used an electric Bolex and Kodak Tri-X 16mm film, just as Warhol had. While researching the *Screen Tests*, I learned that they were based on images of the 'most wanted' on police leaflets. You can really draw a line from police photography to the colonial archive; from the history of photographic taxonomies and eugenics, to mugshots and criminal physiognomy. There are so few people of colour, or so few people who were not white, in Warhol's archive of *Screen Tests*, that it made me think that this omission was more significant than the racial exclusion within the underground scene in New York at the time. Warhol's *Screen Tests*, unconsciously or not, draw some of their power by taking this lineage of black image production and applying it to white and privileged subjects.

EM: The final work you produced during the residency is presented in your exhibition at Chisenhale Gallery. It is a silent portrait of Diamond Reynolds who, in 2016, broadcast via Facebook Live the moments immediately after her partner Philando Castile was shot by police during a traffic-stop in Minnesota. When did you first see Diamond Reynolds' video?

LWT: Racialised life and death is something I have been talking about, and talking to, in my practice for some time. In 2012, I made a work, *untitled*, that drew on the killing of Pihema Cameron, a Maori teenager

in Auckland, where I grew up. That specific case had a pursuit by a white vigilante at its core - and it came to bear dramatic similarities to the case of Trayvon Martin, a teenager who was pursued and fatally shot by a vigilante in Florida, in 2012. This shooting occurred a month before the exhibition of my work opened in Auckland.

In 2014, I went to New York to make a new work, *Eventually they introduced me to the people I immediately recognised as those who would take me out anyway*, that developed out of research into stop-and-frisk policies. During the research period of that project, Michael Brown, an 18-year old, was stopped by a police officer and shot multiple times in Ferguson, Missouri. Both cases of these two young men who lost their lives were turning points in the global attention and consciousness around black lives mattering. For millions of people, myself included, the crisis of growing numbers of racialised killings had moved more clearly into focus.

Last year, I made the conscious decision to start watching the increasing number of videos of police violence that were circulating online. In this recent cycle of police violence, the terms of visibility changed with a wave of cell phone reportage. It was like every possible nightmare one could imagine might appear online. In July 2016, Diamond Reynolds recorded, via Facebook Live, the immediate aftermath of her partner Philando Castile's fatal shooting by a police officer. In the first three days the video had been viewed by millions of people. In the video, Diamond describes and records the moments in which she is a witness and a participant. She describes the exchange between herself, the police officer, and her partner who is passing away on camera. Diamond addresses the police officer as 'Sir' five times throughout her video and explains that Castile was reaching for his wallet when the officer shot him. She is so eloquent; she perfectly narrates what has happened, and who said what and when, which is crucial. This was an act of witnessing and a central piece of evidence, made under impossible circumstances.

After Diamond's video, I realised there was no more important conversation about the image than in these videos. For me, the project began with this video. I decided to reach out to her, or respond to her 'call', to 'call her back' in a way.

EM: *What do you mean to 'call her back'?*

LWT: I've been thinking about the role of collaboration in citizen-recorded videos of police violence – what it is to make images in moments of unfolding tragedy for transmission. Through the

distribution of these videos, via a global online network, the videos escape the immediate environment of their recording: in some ways they escape the terror under which they are produced. Through broadcasting, the possibility for someone with the agency to assist occurs. This collaborative approach only works if there is always someone there to catch the video. It occurred to me that this is a fundamental aspect: that the images are produced both for and by their distribution.

There is a radical communication in Diamond's video. It was a prayer to the – now over nine million – people that viewed it to do something. One answer is to watch it, one answer is to apply pressure in some way, another answer is to show up – Diamond gives her call and a lawyer shows up, others show up, and I show up. Because of her speech, in that moment of violence and terror, Diamond created the possibility for someone to respond or reply. So that is where the process began.

EM: How did you get in touch with Diamond Reynolds and begin the process of producing your response to her video?

LWT: I wrote letters to people about it. I asked friends and unnamed collaborators to help. I asked them what they thought about making contact with Diamond and whether it would be possible. I asked journalists who had covered the story about which lawyers were best to write to. I called the law firm Power, Rogers & Smith, LLP, who were representing Diamond and her daughter Dae'anna. On the day after the police officer was officially charged, I tried again and made contact. The firm agreed to pass a letter from me to Diamond. There was a lot of back-and-forth emailing. I then made a more formal proposal for the artwork – a script. I called again to enquire how things had been received and, by that time, Diamond's lawyer, Larry Rogers Jnr, and I had built up enough trust that we had a conference call with Diamond herself.

EM: Following that call, Chisenhale Gallery helped to facilitate a meeting with Diamond for you to talk about the work that you wanted to produce. Did you already have an idea of what the work would be?

LWT: In the letter I sent to Diamond I wrote that we couldn't make something that would come close to the power of her video, but we could nevertheless try to make a second one – a 'sister' image.

For eleven months, Diamond's video has been used and misused. Her video has proliferated online as, what artist and writer Hito Steyerl describes as, 'a poor image' – an image that moves through different

contexts and is reworked by different content producers. Diamond's video has been edited to different lengths; it has the watermarks of various media channels. It has also been used against its original intention; for example, it has been presented on hate sites and law enforcement support forums. It is understood that every image can be torn to shreds and rebuilt within a different discursive constellation. Observing this phenomenon is how my idea for the work, for a 'sister image', formed and the 'sister film', of course, can't be the same as the original. In the case of my work, the 'sister image' consists of a set of opposing qualities to Diamond's original video: it is slow, and still. It can only be screened on a 35mm film projector and under the utmost conditions of control. It broadcasts Diamond at another moment.

EM: In February 2017, we went to Minneapolis – you, Polly Staple, Director of Chisenhale Gallery and I – to meet with Diamond Reynolds and Larry Rogers Jnr. We arranged to meet with Diamond in person, in order for you to present your idea for the artwork, and for Polly and I to introduce Chisenhale Gallery. It was also an opportunity for Diamond to ask you questions about working together. Would you like to talk about what happened in that meeting?

LWT: It was a full day meeting. It was moving for me to meet Diamond, and I think she was affected by our commitment to her, despite the distance between us.

At a particular point, Larry Rogers Jnr was initially reluctant to agree to the collaboration because of the real danger in Diamond speaking publically about the events of 6 July. He was aware that her words could be used by the opposing council in the ongoing case involving the officer charged with the shooting of Philando Castile, and in which Diamond would likely be a principle witness. This could be made to show a very harmless contradiction in something Diamond had previously said, and could then be used as counter evidence. In interviews, Mr Rogers would often repeat the phrase 'everything was already said in Diamond's live streamed video', so further testimony couldn't be produced. I had always imagined the work as a silent film and Diamond and Larry agreed to a silent film, which was a turning point.

EM: We also discussed the image you wanted to produce, one that could not easily circulate or be manipulated online. As you mentioned earlier, the work could only be presented within a very controlled environment. Could you say more about why you chose to shoot the film on 35mm?

LWT: I think the primary reason had to do with a connection between Diamond's video, made in a moment of trauma, and the physicality of analogue film. In both instances, what is recorded becomes the only possible image. It never felt like I had the right to take a digital HD camera and record endless amounts of footage, as it always felt like a privilege to create Diamond's portrait.

There's a depth and brilliance to the medium of 35mm film that can evoke an emotional response, even in its most abstracted capturing of shadow and light. It would be easy to say it is the contrast of Diamond's video, because it differs so dramatically in terms of pacing, resolution, and picture clarity, not to mention film grain versus pixilation. But mostly, in order to show up the consequence of Diamond's video I wanted to work in cinema's most canonical form; its high court.

EM: Did you direct Diamond's performance in the film you produced?

LWT: Yes. There's choreography to Diamond's movements, which is about breaking the rhythm of the length of film and interrupting any pressure that might build during the filming process, which was not easy for her. I felt that if the performance, on the whole, could be read as underperformed, it might critique the agency of traditional media platforms, for example, interviews and talk shows which often force their subjects to re-live trauma on screen.

Diamond and I had many conversations about how she wanted to appear. We both had similar ideas; too many to cover in great detail here, but what stands out was our shared interest in an image's life span. What Diamond wanted was less about the picture and more about the preservation of the film. She was determined to consider how the images we were producing might operate, or operate differently, 20 years from now and she urged me to keep that in mind.

EM: autoportrait is the title of your solo exhibition at Chisenhale Gallery and the title of the portrait of Diamond, which is presented as a single screen projection in the gallery. What resonance do you think Diamond's image might have for audiences here in London?

To me, there are so few possibilities to work across a real boundary, or in other words, between a real psychological or physical difference between two people. I don't think the boundary at play in this work is race, class or geographical location, or the difference produced through education or life expectancy: everything that can make two people very different from each other. I don't think any of those typical markers are the difference in the work. I think the difference in the work is how

hard Diamond's experience of living, day-to-day, second-to-second, can be. Four minutes and thirty seconds – the length of time to use a roll of film up and the length time she would sit for the camera without the connection of a phone, or connection with her daughter – to be alone for that length of time was, and is, incredibly hard for her. That is what it is like to be her right now – to have these memories and to live with this vigilant fear. It was continually hard for her during the filming process to keep communicating out of that place. It's likely that a large percentage of the audience can only try to relate, as I can only do too, but the attempt at establishing that relation is itself critical for the piece.

EM: The film is slow-paced and silent. In one roll of film, Diamond's breathing comes into focus and this roll feels quite meditative. Would you like to say something about breathing and the mechanics of the film production?

LWT: Firstly, there is this single, powerful, very interesting metaphor of 'I can't breathe'. Eric Garner repeated those words 11 times when he was placed in a chokehold by police and died during his arrest in New York, 2014. The phrase became a chant, a protest song. It has also been theorised. Writers Christina Sharpe and Ashon T. Crawley, among others, write about breath, and what it is politically. What it is to keep breathing and keep living when you're under a regime that does everything to cease those faculties. My contribution to that conversation is to imagine a breathless space as an airless space and to think about how that relates to sound or an absence of it. An idea that I have been interested in throughout this process is breathing as an analogue technology in relation to singing.

EM: Is the film edited at all?

LWT: The rolls are shot and there is no editing to what is recorded but the next roll would have corrections based on what had occurred in the previous roll. There are six rolls that exist; so four rolls have been edited out, and the work is made of two rolls joined together. There are also slight adjustments made to correct the colour. I always knew it wouldn't be a film with speech, which is a kind of edit, or redaction. Silence is a basis for the work, which also relates to the legal reasons – as was mentioned – and working with this which made Diamond's presence possible. When you're doing something minimal everything is an edit.

EM: Would you like to say something about what Diamond is doing now?

LWT: This interview was recorded on 8 June and edited during the week prior to the exhibition opening on 22 June. My initial answer to this question revolved around the indeterminacy of life for Diamond, between not knowing if officer Jeronimo Yanez was to be found guilty of second-degree manslaughter or not, or whether justice would be delivered, or not. I felt then how I feel now, that I wanted this artwork to accompany Diamond in that state, reflecting both the freedom and constriction of waiting. On the 16 June, the Friday prior to the exhibition's opening, Jeronimo Yanez, the officer who shot Philando Castile was found not guilty by a jury of his peers, of all charges, which included the two counts of Dangerous Discharge of a Firearm that pertain directly to Diamond and her daughter Dae'anna. It now seems inappropriate to speculate on what is occurring for Diamond outside of the small amount I do know: breathing, mourning, fighting.

Interviewed by Emma Moore, Offsite and Education Curator, Chisenhale Gallery, on Thursday 8 June 2017. Chisenhale Gallery, London. Chisenhale Interviews, series editor, Polly Staple, Director, Chisenhale Gallery.

To download a digital copy of this interview, please scan the QR code below.



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READING LIST

A reading list of texts, books and articles has been compiled in collaboration with Luke Willis Thompson to accompany his exhibition, *autoprotrait*, at Chisenhale Gallery. This resource expands on ideas raised through Thompson's new commission. Included are news articles and court documents that report on the case of Philando Castile and Diamond Reynolds; essays and books that provide reference and further context to the work; an interview between Luke Willis Thompson and Tobi Haslett; and a review of his most recent work, *Cemetery of Uniforms and Liveries* (2016), produced during his *Chisenhale Gallery Create Residency* (2016-17).

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