

RCA Podcast: “Here we are, behold our power and beauty” - celebrating the RCA’s Black community

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Benji Jeffrey

00:23 Poem by Alumna Thalia Dougourou (Visual Communication MA, 2023)

What are we if not voyage on an infinite journey of discovery. Navigating unfamiliar terrain without fear but with curiosity and purpose. Here we are, behold our power and beauty. Cosmic beings in eternal place, everything that is and everything that once was burdened with glorious light that is often ignored. We dance in the celestial void. That between place where the edge of the sun kisses the horizon, have you seen it? You might find yourself asking who am I? when you find yourself alone in a crowded room, misunderstood and underrepresented. Know that you are not alone, you are a part of a constellation of beings burning bright with beauty and creativity. We are bound by cosmic forces that exude ancestral energy. We are more than the **unseen**. We are part of the living and breathing pools of community. Think about that the next time you say who am I, somewhere in the in between place. Can you see it? We are guided by ancestor spirits, showing us the way to the unknown, shall we dance together in the infinite cosmos. Let us rejoice in our endeavor to reach those parts of our souls. Yearning to be unleashed. That part that sings the songs of the universe in our hearts. That part that is a powerful fraction of our ancestral lineage, giving us access to so much all you have to do is look with our hearts.

Benji Jeffrey 02:40

Hello, and welcome to this podcast from the Royal College of Art. Home to the next generation of creatives and the world's number one art and design University. Representing the largest concentration of postgraduate artists and designers on the planet. I'm your host Benji Jeffrey and you've just been listening to a poem written by RCA visual communication alumna Thalia Dougourou. Talia is an artist whose practice dismantles Eurocentric perspectives on African history through word and image. The poem she was reading was commissioned by RCA Black. The RCA's association of black students, alumni and friends. It is part of Blackstar, a project creating a time capsule of artworks from the RCA BLK community to be sent into outer space. Thalia's poem captures the importance and power of community and the vital support that a sense of connection both to peers but also to those who have gone before can offer black artists and designers. On the RCA podcast, we bring you insights into the

philosophy behind the programmes and the teaching and learning which takes place at the college by talking to staff, students and the wider RCA community about what we do here. Today that conversation is all about the RCA's black community, past, present and future. For this episode of the podcast, I spoke to two individuals who support and foster a sense of connection and community here at the RCA Ekua McMorris and Emily Moore. Ekua is an interdisciplinary artist and researcher who graduated from an MA in photography at the college in 2009. Subsequently, she curated the 2011 RCA black exhibition in her role as the student union president, and she is currently a tutor on the Graduate Diploma in Art and Design here at the RCA supporting the next generation of artists and designers at the college. Emily is a visual artist who graduated from an MA in painting at the RCA in 2020. She is co-chair of RCA black, a recent initiative that encourages and supports contemporary visual artists who identify as black within the RCA wider community. They have established scholarships provided mentoring and organised networking events, exhibitions and socials with the goal of making incremental changes within the RCA to positively impact the experience of students from the African diaspora. Emily, Ekua and I spoke about the 2011 RCA black exhibition, which showcased the work of past black students from throughout the history of the college. We also discussed the current RCA black Association, how it came about, and the importance of having a network of support and solidarity. The music you have been listening to during this introduction is from a track by Andrew Pierre Hart, an RCA painting graduate. It's taken from a mix he created to accompany his exhibition, the listening suite three Lagos. Ekua, Emily, thank you for joining us today.

05:57

Emily Moore

Thank you,

Benji Jeffrey 05:59

yeah, good. All right, let's get straight into it. So Ekua, could you tell us a bit about the 2011 RCA black exhibition and how it came to be?

06:08

Ekua McMorris

In 2010, I became the student union president took over from Jack Tan, who was president in 2009 to 2010. And we got approached by the African and African Caribbean design diaspora to do a project. And we thought, actually, let's do something about the black students of the RCA, current and alumni, which required a lot of research. And it was really great, actually, because at the time, there weren't so many black students at the RCA, it was quite few. And I remember when I was a student, people would come up to me and say, Oh, I know who you are, you know. And I'd be like, everyone knew who I was. I didn't know who anyone was. Because it was just me. I mean, I wasn't the only black student, but I was the only one with no hair. Skinhead at the time. Or bald head, as my mom would say.

Benji Jeffrey 07:00

Sorry, a bald head? What does that mean? A skinhead?

07:03

Ekua McMorris

Yeah. And so, we just felt myself and Cordelia who was the vice president felt that it would be really important to do something to recognise the contribution of black students past and present to the RCA. And alongside the African diaspora design initiative, we work together to dig up as many students from the past and hold an exhibition.

Benji Jeffrey 07:32

How did you manage to find these students?

07:35

Ekua McMorris

Through the registry actually and so it was really going to the back catalogue, and seeing what they had and names and finding out who would be willing to send their work in. And we found one of the first black students at the RCA, a man called Barrington Watson from Jamaica. Who I think studied in '67, who passed away a few years ago now. But he was really excited to be part of the exhibition. But yeah, we it required a lot of help and support from registry and the administration to sort of find the names of who was who, because it wasn't really categorised by then whether if they were black or not. So, then we had to do background research.

Benji Jeffrey 08:22

So what did you say his name was?

08:23

Ekua McMorris

Barrington Watson.

Benji Jeffrey 08:25

Barrington Watson. It's quite an interesting thing to sort of be the beginning. Yeah, of a lineage, like, how did you feel about what had come

08:32

Ekua McMorris

he was really excited and actually really generous. He sent us a painting from Jamaica, he lives in Jamaica, we didn't actually get to speak with him. But he was really keen and excited to have his work in the exhibition. But he remembered his time at the RCA really fondly from what I can remember, I was trying to find emails from back then. They're long gone. And just that correspondence between ourselves and those who contributed to the exhibition.

Benji Jeffrey 09:03

And how many people were there in the exhibition?

09:05

Ekua McMorris

I think we had 22, in total. And I was again, also looking for the catalogue that we made.

Benji Jeffrey 09:11

Well the catalogue does exist. It's in the archive.

09:15

Ekua McMorris

It's in the archive. I was gonna bring on with me here today. I was looking for it. But yeah, we moved out and it's in boxes, and we haven't unpacked them, three years ago. Yeah, I think there was about 22 students in total alumni and current.

Benji Jeffrey 09:28

Amazing. And was that from across different programmes? Was it because was it mostly arts and humanities or was it

09:34

Ekua McMorris

It was from design we had students from jewellery, sculpture, photography. No, no one from research. No, no writers. Unfortunately. We had Frank Bowling. He sent, he... there's a painting that the RCA owned. So, we loaned one of his huge pieces of work to put in the exhibition, Joy Gregory, Charlie Allen, who's a man, a tailor menswear designer, Faisal Abdullah is a photographer and **hedge Alibaba**. Yeah.

Benji Jeffrey 10:10

Nice. And like Frank Bowling, of course is really important to this discussion, but move. We'll come on to him a bit more later on. But Emily, were you aware of the the exhibition before you came?

Emily Moore 10:20

Yeah, so I wasn't aware of it before I came. But since I think since we're doing the RCA black work, we, myself and Ekua have had conversations about extending exhibition and what that could look like today. So yeah, I think it was a powerful exhibition at the time and really potent to you know, the conversations that were happening at the RCA. Yeah. And are still happening today.

Benji Jeffrey 10:43

Yeah. And was it influential on the on the naming, was there something to do with that kind of lineage that came came into the naming the association?

10:51

Emily Moore

I think there's there's a differentiation between RCA black as in the exhibition, because that is spelt B.L.A.C.K. Yeah. Whereas the association is B.L.K, which is a bit of a wordplay. But also, I think, I mean, as I said, I wasn't aware of the exhibition before, like, you know, doing the work of RCA black. However, I'm sure like that, you know, that pathology and that legacy of what you guys were doing at that time is really implemented and left the doors open to what we're able to do now. You know, as a as an organisation. So yeah.

Benji Jeffrey 11:27

and can you tell us a bit more about RCA B, we'll call it RCA BLK this conversation, but can you tell us a bit more about how that started?

11:37

Emily Moore

Yeah. So I see a black there was a number of initiatives that came up before I see black. Some of them I've been become more aware of since like doing the work of RCA black, such as the POC linkup which is the people of colour. It sounds like the people of colour...link up. But yeah. But you know, the RCA RCA black came about in 2020. Really, it started off with a conversation between myself and another graduate at the time, Roxanne Simone from jewellery and metal. And they actually happened on Zoom. Because, you know, there was no interaction we didn't, we weren't actually able to physically meet each other. And it just happened in passing that we were walking, I was walking going to the bus stop from Battersea, and she was walking in one direction. And we both realised that we went to the RCA, we'd never met on campus before. And we were like, hey, hey, you know, that kind of, I see you sister. And from there, we exchanged details. And we never actually got to have a conversation till to the COVID because that was just before that hit of COVID came in March. And we had a conversation online about you know, just about what it means to be a student here. You know, some of the things that we faced some of the things that we wouldn't want anyone else to face. And then through that conversation, there was an introduction to Halima from RCA Student Union. Yeah. And we started, again, kind of regrouping and having a conversation about, you know, what is needed, it was all off the back of the BLM that was happening across the world. And we really realised how much we all needed a support network. So really and truly the RCA black started off as a support network for each other, we were meeting on Zoom, it started growing, you know, there was conversations, it was like, drop it almost like a drop in session or constant like drop in sessions for, you know, potential students, new students, alumni, it was a really an exciting time, because there was so much creativity and and people were making, obviously, from their house. And, you know, there was so much uncertainty that it just gave, like, almost like a boost in this energy of, like robust creativity that people just wanted to just do stuff on your own. You know, all over the world, because there was people who were like, you know, weren't just based in London anymore, because they went back to the respective places. And they

were just talking like, what do we need? What do we want? And you know, and so I see black really came from a movement of people who just wanted to just see change.

Benji Jeffrey

And needed each other, right?

Emily Moore

Yeah, and needed each other. And we created manifesto, there was a manifesto, about, you know, supporting students through scholarships, which now we know is the Frank Bowling scholarships, but that all came off the back of, you know, people just having a conversation. And I think that is really something that we need to be reminded of in a space like this, like, how, you know, the importance of just communicating and listening to each other.

Benji Jeffrey 14:52

Yeah. I think the conversations that happen outside of the curriculum quite often can be the most important ones in terms of the growth when you're when you're a student, right? How do you find that because you're teaching on the Graduate Diploma. So, I guess across 2020, when all this was happening, you were in a slightly different position to Emily, how was that for you?

15:11

Ekua McMorris

It's just wonderful to know that that was happening in those moments, because those feelings of isolation can feel quite immense, particularly at a time when COVID really did isolate people. But as a black student, you can sometimes feel like you're the only one in this space. I know it's different. Now I walk around Kensington in particular, and I see lots of other black students, and it's quite Oh, that's wonderful. You know, because that wasn't the case when I was a student here. And that's not that long ago, in the scheme of things, so there's a lot of change at the grad dip, it's, yeah, it's really great. It's nice to be on the other side and see it and not feel overwhelmed by the studentship of it all of feeling like you're the only one. Also, because of the great team that I work with. You know, we're really diverse, which I think is is amazing. And I've never worked in a within a department of people who come from all over the world. Yes, that's a real privilege. But I'm also able to see how maybe some of our other students who joined grad dip, our black students are growing. But there's been moments when there's just one and I know I can empathise with them, you know, and also, not just myself, myself and Nathan front who are called can you know, help point students in the right direction and towards RCA black. Where there's a real network. It's a supportive network, which is really great.

Benji Jeffrey 16:45

And I guess one of the great things about particular, your role, Emily, is that you know, that their staff members like you are cool, but you're very much in one part of the institution. And we've students they come through, and they leave and you know, kind of initiatives come and they disappear, and **the ebb** and flow, but to have this consistency, how have you found that Emily, knowing that you are the consistency, I guess.

17:07

Emily Moore

you know, I'm not a consistency, I think we have to remember that this is a community regardless, I think one of the things that, you know, while setting up RCA black, it was definitely about building legacy. It was about you know, celebrating the legacy that the great people that have come through the RCA previous to us, and those who are with us now, but those who will also come after us, you know, so for me, I'm just a conduit of this space at the moment. And I'm sure there's going to be someone else that comes in and they take over and they're able to, to bring a new energy.

Benji Jeffrey 17:41

But that facilitate is important. Don't diminish yourself. And thinking about those that have come before and going to come. There's a new initiative, new residency just started. Could you tell us a bit about that?

17:52

Emily Moore

Yeah, so the Yinka Shonibare Foundation is an amazing, amazing foundation itself by Yinka Shonibare, he's an artist, Nigerian artist based in the UK, and he has a residency programme in Lagos, Nigeria. And it's been running for, I think, for at least now, two years. And so, it's been a great, you know, to be able to partnership with them. And really to have those conversations, there is needed conversations, you know, across continents, for our students and for our wider RCA black community as well, because the residency programme is, you know, targeted at both alumni who are artists, but also there's a research element to it as well. So, and that's, that's open to our tutors, you know, our research fellows are PhD, I mean, yeah, PhD, but I think that's, that's exactly, you know, the kind of things that I say black art are looking to initiate moving forward. Yeah.

Benji Jeffrey 18:51

Right. And what, what, what else is on the horizon? Because I know, there's also been, there was quite a lot of members of the RCA black community who was showing it freeze, right, as part of, I'm gonna get the numbers wrong, 1...8

Emily Moore

154

Benji Jeffrey

154 yeah sorry, I knew it was a combination.

19:08

Emily Moore

think the great thing about you know, being an artist and a practitioner, there isn't one set time, like, you know, your work is in in situ, or is being ignited by the audience that it is in faced with. And so, you

know, you've got alumni who studied at the RCA, Lubaina Himid. Who's like next **to Za you know or** someone who's just graduated now like Shaquille white, and I feel like that dialogue and that conversation is exactly, you know, the exciting things that both us as, as practitioners can witness, but also the audience and those who are interested in being in the arts can go and see like, what this looks like. But no, there's lots of great shows and events. I mean, there's one of our recent graduates from the curatorial department **Durrell** and he's just opened up his own gallery you know, and the first show he's had was one of his peers, from the contemporary art practice. You know, that's a solo show. And that also coincided with reason 154. So, you've got all of these great, like pockets and nuggets of gold just popping up all over, you know, and this is, you know, in true nature to what I see a black means, yeah, as an organisation, you're really seeing the flourishing of different different communities.

Benji Jeffrey 20:26

Nice. And how does that how have you kind of seen this growing? It must be quite amazing to see what you maybe wish you'd had when you're a student emerging?

20:37

Ekua McMorris

Oh, absolutely. It's funny, I was thinking about what you're speaking about now. And the present time. I was at a talk a few years ago, at the Black Cultural Archives. And I was with the black Artists Collective, like women from the 80s. I'm probably saying the title wrong, but women from the 80s, who started, you know, really making a platform for black artists...

21:05

Emily Moore

Marlene Smith, Claudette Johnson, all of these, we have to say the names to celebrate.

21:20

Ekua McMorris

And how they were really happy to see RCA black exhibition, coming from where the space and time that they came from. And then to see it grow. I mean, I know it's two different things, but to see these opportunities made available to current students and alumni is brilliant. Yeah, it's absolutely wonderful. and it allows you to dream a little bit more to think okay, things. They might not be necessarily getting easy all the time, but they're changing.

Benji Jeffrey 21:52

Yeah, yeah. And we've got is, are we in the second year of the Frank Bowling scholarship? Or is it the first year or the third year?

21:59

Ekua McMorris

So as the as the name, Franklin Bowling scholarships, it's the second year but as in the name of as in the scholarships as a whole? probably about the third year, because it was originally called the I think, the black student scholarships, which was what, you know, we were instrumental in making sure that that that lived?

Benji Jeffrey 22:20

And do you feel like you're seeing you're, you're seeing the changes that those scholarships have put in place, you're seeing more kind of black bodies,

22:25

Ekua McMorris

we're seeing it in grad dip on Graduate Diploma. We've got the reason why our black students are the number of black students that we have has grown is also because of the scholarship, which is fantastic.

22:36

Emily Moore

Yeah, I think it's, I think it's a great, it's been a great initiative. And I think, I hope RCA you know, listens to this and keeps it on. Let's let it roll on. Yeah. But you know, there's, there's something about leaving the door open, for people to be able to make work in the space that, you know, just allows them to dream, as you just mentioned. And I think, you know, the scholarships have been that for a lot of people. You know, it takes away the pressures, it reminds people that, you know, they're visible, you know, we celebrate you, we know that you're talented, you know, all of these kind of ticks that, you know, that pat on the back that not everybody you be kind of, you know, not everyone gets.

23:25

Ekua McMorris

Yeah, well, it made me think also, like you just saying that now, I remember when I got the acceptance letter for the RCA. And I don't know if it's still the same. It was this big A4 envelope came through the letterbox and I was like, they're not going to send me that to tell me I didn't get in. So, my heart started beating straight away. And instead of feeling immensely confident in myself, my confidence evaporated, because I was like, who do I think I am? That I can go to the Royal College of Art? And also, what space is there for me? And actually, I think now that there are the Frank Bowling scholarship is available. And there are more like students, more black students will think, yeah, I can go there. And there is a space for me. Because I seem you've had all of these other spaces.

Benji Jeffrey 24:19

Yeah. I hadn't even thought about it in that context as well. Like, yeah, knowing that there is several gamma scholarship going out like yeah, so that's how they just like kind of made sense in my head. Yeah, that's amazing, isn't it?

24:29

Ekua McMorris

Absolutely. Because I know if I was a student applying for the RCA now, I wouldn't be able to afford it. And I would have to go for I would probably have to try and see if I could get a scholarship. And the fact that that exists, opens it just it really is a breath of fresh air. Actually, it's release that okay, there's an opportunity there's a possibility.

Benji Jeffrey 24:53

But also circling back to what you were saying about the kind of imposter I don't think you said in these words but the imposter syndrome kind of thing. And another thing is with with the RCA black association is that you have like dropping sessions as well, right so that people can come and talk to you, which is another kind of comfort knowing that that sort of service is available.

25:08

Emily Moore

Yeah I mean, we have dropping sessions, we had a brilliant session last December, at the frieze cork Street, where we had like a, a session where students, we had food and drink and music, and it was just like, everyone walked into the space and was like, is this the RCA. I'm like yes this is the RCA like you know just reminding people, you know, what that space looks like, is also very important, you know, because I mean, Ekua I mentioned earlier on about, you know, when she was here, there wasn't a lot of black students. I was here in 2020. And it was the same, you know, the reasons why these scholarships are so important, because I know what it's like to work hard, like, have how many jobs also be juggling family life, and be like, pinching a little food for mom and dad, you know, to survive? And that's a real, that's a real yeah, that's real life, you know. And so leaving that door open for someone else, and not to have that struggle is, you know, it's a blessing to be able to be in this position, but it's also something that should just have come so much more naturally...to the space.

Benji Jeffrey

Sure, yeah.

26:19

Ekua McMorris

And so, the fact that you have drop-in sessions where you could. I always feel like it's like, well, you can take your coat off, you don't have to carry this extra layer of whatever is bothering you, or whatever it is

that you're dealing with, to have a drop-in session where you can do that. Have someone to go and speak to.

26:41

Emily Moore

I mean, they're great, because it means that it's not just, it means that other people get to meet people as well.

Benji Jeffrey 26:48

Just to kind of thinking beyond the institution, how would you feel like the the wider landscape is for students like black students leaving university and going out into the art world, design world, architecture world? Like, I know, for example, the Architecture Biennale of this year was was the positioning Africa as the laboratory of the future, I might have gotten that slightly wrong. But you know, do you feel like it's maybe a more welcoming place than back in 2011?

27:20

Ekua McMorris

That's a hard one. I think there's been lots of changes. And I think there's been lots of positive changes, and particularly with the unfortunate murder of George Floyd. And Black Lives Matter what came out of that there's been some positive steps to really acknowledge and promote black initiatives, whether it's black films, whether it's black art, and discussions. And so, I don't know, I think one's attitude should always be that I can do this. And no one should say that you can't, and to have that belief that you can. And actually, if someone's telling you can't, to try and find a way. So, I think always that sort of energy of being I'm gonna do this, and I have a right to it, is necessarily. So yeah, I think it's very positive in many ways. Yeah.

Benji Jeffrey 28:18

What about you, Emily?

28:20

Emily Moore

um, that some of the work RCA black, are trying to help to support. I mean, it's great having all these scholarships, but I do think that there should be, you know, industry support professional support and development for students who don't, who haven't come from that background. Who are new to this. So, you know, it's slowly growing. But, you know, if there's anyone listening anyone out there, I mean, get in touch. But to be honest with you, we've been working with some great alumni. You know, outside. The great thing about RCA Black and I'm a Student Alumni Association and friends, is that there's so many people who are willing to support the efforts of RCA black and to see people really shine in and rising. You know, studio FREF, who graduated from RCA **black for Africa**, has been supporting us in our

branding, you know, when you think about that, you know, and those relationships were helping to foster and what that looks like for the next generation, I think. Yeah.

Benji Jeffrey 29:19

Right. So, I just wondered if either of you had any advice for anyone that wanted to kind of think about kind of postgraduate study who perhaps is someone who was black and feels like they don't quite know the roots in and or what the sport is going to be like, are there is there anything beyond what you've spoken about that you would advise someone to do or seek?

29:42

Emily Moore

I think in this space, yes, we're supporting Black students, but I think it's also about if you have if you have that urge, if your heart is pulling you towards like creating a making and you want to outlet and you want to be in a community like this, you know, if you want to be here no matter who you are, what age you are, where your background is, where you where you live in the world come? Yeah, you know, reach out. You know, come and see an open day, send send an email, send that email, you know, speak to someone who's already studied here. Yeah. And get the ball rolling.

30:17

Ekua McMorris

think like Emily said, you know, if you have that urge, and that pull, I wouldn't let fear rule you. Yeah, just do it. preparation meets opportunity. And if you're in the right space, headspace, and you feel ready. You have to jump. Yeah, just do it. See, and it will open. You know, you have to take that risk.

Benji Jeffrey 30:41

Yeah. Yeah. But then also be aware that there are people that will give you comfort. When you arrive here as well, right.

30:48

Benji Jeffrey 30:50

It's a lot. It's a lot to get in there. Thank you. Was there anything else either of you want us to share before we...

30:55

Ekua McMorris

Thank you. But I just want to thank all of those who have been a part of this journey. You know, there's been so many voices, so many people, so many, you know, people who have put their foot and their heart and their soul into making this space available for everyone. And I'm sorry if I haven't named you all, but I send you lots of love and well wishes.

Benji Jeffrey 31:18

Thank you both for joining me today. It's been fantastic conversation. You've been listening to the Royal College of Art Podcast, home to the next generation of artists, innovators and entrepreneurs, and the world's number one art and design University. You can learn more about our programmes at programmes@rca.ac.uk as well as finding news and events relating to the college and our application portal if you're a prospective student.