

Response

Issue 4

[An experimental collage filling most of the page. It shows ripped details of black and white photographs, layered with bright pink, green and purple tape and ripped coloured papers. Photographic images include details of artists Grace Jones and Jimmy Robert.]

[Photograph of Jimmy Robert's artwork. Photo displays an image of Jimmy Robert's body printed onto a cylindrical structure. The entire image is overlaid with a blue filter.]

[Black and white photograph of Grace Jones's head. The top half of her face is covered with white fabric wrapped around her head, leaving her nose, mouth and chin exposed.]

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[Graphic showing a simple collage of two ripped coloured papers and tape.]

Introduction

This collection of work is created by Nottingham Trent University students in response to the themes within two exhibitions at Nottingham Contemporary: *Grace Before Jones: Camera, Disco, Studio* and *Jimmy Robert: Akimbo*. With guidance from Nottingham Contemporary staff, we have explored various ideas of identity, expression and rebellion, and created this publication to express our own take on these ideas. This has been a virtual project due to the COVID-19 pandemic, so we have worked remotely to write, design and publish this fourth issue of *Response*.

Each of us brings a unique set of skills and interests to our work. Our differences have allowed us to approach this project from several angles and share our ideas to create a publication we are proud of.

From looking into the lives of the two artists Grace Jones and Jimmy Robert, to interviews with local drag queens and emerging visual artists, this publication offers a diverse range of ideas and visual responses that we hope will inspire more thinking and discussion.

Rebellion: Grace Vs Jimmy

Written by Derek Miller Hurtado

What is Rebellion?

Rebellion is the action or process of resisting authority, control or convention. Throughout the exhibitions, we are made aware of how both artists have rebelled in their own way. How they have both fought tirelessly to end the hate that has been forced upon us time and time again by a prejudicial, narrow-minded and altogether intolerant society. While Grace Jones has been more extroverted in her approach to defying the norms that have been increasingly imposed on us, Jimmy Robert takes a more subdued and introverted approach.

[Photograph of Grace Jones performing, a microphone in hand, wearing an elaborate feathered headpiece, and body paint. The image appears in negative with a green filter, with added graphic effects of coloured tape in places around the edge of the image and a piece of tape covering Jones's eyes.]

Ever since her first steps into the scene back in the 1970s, Jones has used her forthright personality and unique, androgynous looks to stand out and become the icon we know and love. Nevertheless, she didn't lose sight of her beliefs and continued to use bigger and better platforms to advocate for diversity. In film, music and even the fashion industry she managed to dominate and create a symbiotic relationship between them all, one where creativity and inclusion were the norm. For her, it was never about notoriety or fame, she did it because it came naturally to her. She was a born leader. Jones was not born to follow, she made her own path with her own rules, and because it was so new

and captivating, people decided to follow suit. Because of her unreserved and spontaneous attitude, Jones was and continues to be a synonym of freedom and self-expression.

[Black and white photograph of a United States flag overlaid with the words 'What is Rebellion?' written in bright pink lettering. In the background is a crowd in the daytime.]

In contrast, Jimmy Robert's work focuses on a considered approach to breaking racial constructs and the stereotypes that are often associated with them. As a gay Black man, he often felt strange to himself and in relation to his background, which is why he decided to take the inner turmoil he was experiencing and conquer it through art. With his careful and delicate work, Robert has managed to create a tangible expression of those familiar emotions which most people who feel misunderstood often struggle with. He has created a deeply personal aesthetic that resonates with his audience and continues to evolve further with time. Robert's art thrives in its simplicity. Through subtle lines and understated colours, he manages to convey a profound sense of self-awareness that stimulates others to look deeply within themselves, to identify and break the chains that are frequently put in place by the upbringing which they were subjected to and which no longer represent who they are.

Even though it is very clear that *Grace Before Jones: Camera, Disco, Studio* and *Jimmy Robert: Akimbo* differ from one another in every aspect, they do share the most important detail of them all: that feeling of breaking free. Through different methods they both show us, the audience, the endless possibilities

for building a world where we are all accepted for who we are. Jones and Robert have both used their bodies to express emotions and thoughts that are sometimes difficult to translate into words. They have managed to make us all feel welcomed. To feel that it doesn't matter how we decide to rebel, whether it is loudly or more quietly, it is all equally necessary when fighting our common enemy: oppression.

[The word 'Equality' is written diagonally as if painted bright green on a black background, with a green paint splat underneath.]

Grace Jones Timeline

Written by Kadesha Langford

Born 19 May 1948

Born in Spanish Town, Jamaica. Jones was raised by strict grandparents who inspired the ferocious persona which later became her trademark.

Jones said that 'The scary character comes from the male authority within [her] religious family.'

[Black and white minimalist illustration of a smiling Grace Jones depicting her with thin eyebrows, full lips and hair arranged in two low buns.]

First Signs of Rebellion

In **1961** Jones joined her parents in America. This is where her rebellious nature began to manifest itself. She rebelled against her religious upbringing once she enrolled at Onondaga Community College, majoring in Spanish.

She began wearing make-up, drinking alcohol, visiting gay clubs with her brother, and she studied theatre at college.

When on a tour in Philadelphia, she decided to stay there and immerse herself in the counterculture of the **1960s**. She lived as a nudist for a month, earning money as a go-go dancer and using LSD and other drugs.

She later praised the use of LSD as 'a very important part of [her] emotional growth ... The mental exercise was good for me'. (Source: A. Lopez [2012]. *Antonio Lopez: Fashion, Art, Sex, and Disco*. Rizzoli.)

Aged 18 she caught the attention of a model scout and signed to a New York agency.

Professional Career

In **1970** Jones moved to Paris where her modelling career took off. This was helped by her long limbs and model physique. She became part of the modelling elite.

Worked for Yves St Laurent and appeared on covers such as *Vogue*.

She became known for her distinctive, androgynous appearance and bold features.

It was during this time in Paris that her model friend Pat Cleveland said she should sing.

In **1977** she embarked on her musical career, securing a record deal with Island Records, and became a star of New York's disco scene.

Her transition to singing was a form of rebellion in itself as Jones's father insisted that she should only use her singing ability to glorify God.

In **1978** she released *Portfolio* and *Fame*. *Fame* was a hit album in the North American club scene and multiple singles reached the top 10 on the US Dance Club Play and Canadian/Urban charts.

[Photograph of Grace Jones in Jean-Paul Goude's artwork. Her hairstyle is short and angular. She is looking at the camera, unsmiling, with a cigarette hanging from her mouth. The background of the photograph is beige-coloured and appears as a montage of several photos.]

New Wave Transition

Disco began to die out, so in the early 1980s Jones moved towards a new wave style that drew on reggae, funk, post-punk and pop music. This resulted in the 1980 release of *Warm Leatherette*.

Collaborated with musical duo Sly and Robbie.

Most popular albums include *Warm Leatherette* (1980), *Nightclubbing* (1981) and *Slave to the Rhythm* (1985).

In **1981** she began collaborating with photographer and graphic designer Jean-Paul Goude, with whom she had a relationship.

Jones's work is often discussed for its visual aspect, which was largely a result of Goude's work. For example, she was listed as one of the 50 best-dressed over-50s by the *Guardian* in March 2013. Artists such as Lady Gaga, Madonna and Beyoncé later credit Jones's image as an inspiration for their own work.

[Black and white illustration of Madonna's profile, inspired by her *True Blue* album cover art. Madonna's head is tilted backwards, exposing her sharply defined jawline and long neck.]

1981 saw the release of *Nightclubbing*. This album entered the top five in four countries and became Jones's highest-ranking record in the US Billboard mainstream albums and R and B charts. It made number one in NME's chart and is now widely considered to be Jones's best album.

On the cover she is presented as a man with a flat-top haircut, Armani suit and a cigarette in her mouth.

Jones's distinctive, androgynous appearance, square-cut, angular and padded clothing, her manner and her height of five feet ten inches influenced the cross-dressing movement of the 1980s.

[Photograph of Grace Jones performing, lit from above and holding a microphone while wearing white geometrically patterned body paint and a long, green, tinsel-like headpiece.]

In **1982** Jones went to the Bahamas and recorded *Living My Life*. The album's cover art was the result of another Jones–Goude collaboration. The artwork has been described as being as famous as the music on the record.

Jones's three albums resulted in the 1982 release of *One Man Show*, a performance art/pop theatre presentation devised by Goude and Jones in which she performs tracks from the albums *Portfolio*, *Nightclubbing* and *Living My Life*.

Jones dressed in elaborate costumes and masks (in the opening sequence as a gorilla) and appeared alongside a series of Grace Jones lookalikes. A video version, filmed live in London and New York City and completed with some studio footage, was nominated for a Grammy Award for best long-form music video the following year.

In **December 1985** Jones released *Island Life*, her first best-of compilation. The artwork on the cover of the compilation featured Jones's body in a montage of separate images, using Goude's ideas about creating credible illusions with his cut-and-paint technique. The body position is anatomically impossible.

1990s

In **1990** Jones appeared as herself in the documentary *Superstar: The Life and Times of Andy Warhol*. The 1990s saw many singles released by Jones.

However, none of this work was as successful as her work in the 80s. She swore that she had decided to never do an album again after these failed comeback attempts.

2000s to the present

In **2008**, although Jones had decided to never do an album again in the 90s, she released *Hurricane*.

In **2012** Jones presented Sir Tom Jones with a *GQ* men of the year award and also her underwear. Tom Jones accepted the gift in good humour and responded by saying 'I didn't think you wore any'. (Source: Michael Osborn [26 November 2008]. An audience with Grace Jones. BBC News Online. Retrieved 28 January 2021.)

In **2015** Jones turned down an approach from Lady Gaga for a possible collaboration. 'I say no a lot. For me, a collaboration has to start by planting a seed and to see if your chemistry works together, and then you have an exchange of ideas ... I have to not just like what you do, but be inspired by what you do, and I was not inspired.' (Source: J. Ruby [2015]. *Grace Jones refused to collaborate with Lady Gaga as she found her to be 'too affected'* [online] available at: <https://www.standard.co.uk/showbiz/celebrity-news/grace-jones-refused-to-collaborate-with-lady-gaga-as-she-found-her-to-be-too-affected-a2952451.html>.)

Jones has spoken about how she has influenced the likes of Rihanna. She criticised Rihanna for copying her look with body paint, which was developed alongside Keith Haring. 'I don't even know if she knows that what she's doing comes from me, but I bet you the people styling her know.' (Source: G. Jones and P. Morley [2016]. *I'll Never Write My Memoirs*, New York: Gallery Books, page 357.) There was also the added difference that Jones paints directly onto her naked skin whereas Rihanna wears body-stockings.

In **2018** Jones received the Order of Jamaica from the Jamaican government.

[Black and white photo of Grace Jones's face filling the page, showing her eyes, nose and mouth, with a neutral expression.]

Identity and Grace in 2020

Written by Jason Shadbolt

Today more than ever, both race and gender identity are at the forefront of conversation around the world. In 2020, the murder of George Floyd sparked international outrage, highlighting the systemic racism that prevails in the United States and across the globe. Meanwhile, the violence against transgender and gender-non-conforming individuals continues, with the number of murders in the US rising significantly year after year.

[Black and white photograph of protestors lying across tramlines with a Black Lives Matter banner.]

However, in the face of adversity, individuals have come together to defy these acts of violence, and the result can only be seen as beautiful. During 2020, first-hand stories of identity, expression and community spread across the globe. People came together in demonstrations of strength, pride and love, and the message was clear: never be afraid to be who you are.

In many ways, Grace Jones represents these ideas. In both her personal and professional realms, Jones expresses herself in an androgynous manner, exploring gender and sexuality in an unapologetic, free way. To pick one

example, this can be seen in the striking images of Jones's fierce buzzcut look, accompanied by a cigarette in hand. She stepped away from traditional stereotypes of gender boundaries and was truly unafraid to be herself. Queer people of all backgrounds can relate to Jones, and her work has inspired many to be more open in their own self-expression.

Being Black is also a huge part of Jones's identity, and this theme can be seen throughout her work. Through art, video, music and fashion, Jones explores racial norms whilst embodying Black beauty. As a strong woman of colour, Grace Jones plays with Black expression and image, creating a space for discussion whilst also encouraging others to be proud within their own bodies.

Jones represents freedom of expression in its purest form. Whilst rejecting stereotypes and social expectations, she continuously explores and experiments with her image. However, this is not so easy for others. As we have seen in the United States recently, Black communities and individuals are often mistreated and dismissed by those who are more privileged. This needs to change. Change is driven by the people, and the people are truly powerful when they reject hate and come together in the name of love and identity.

[Close-up photograph of three protesters, with one holding a megaphone. The entire photograph is overlaid with a bright pink filter.]

[Black and white photograph of a crowd of protesters holding a 'Black Lives Matter' banner.]

[Handwritten graphic of the words 'Never be afraid to be who you are.']

[Black and white photograph of a protesting Black man raising his arms next to a sign saying, 'Justice or violence: you decide.']

There were times during 2020 when it felt dangerous for people to express who they were. Not only was the ability to freely express yourself threatened, but your core identity was also challenged. The colour of someone's skin or the gender someone identified with became grounds for victimisation and the erosion of human rights. Thankfully, people fought back, coming together in a show of solidarity. Black, white, gay, straight or transgender, when people's rights are threatened, it is an attack on all of us. Identity will always be expressed, explored and, above all, fought for.

[Black and white photograph of a person holding a megaphone behind a banner during a protest.]

Don't Be a Drag... Just Be a Queen

Written by Megan Bundy

To exemplify the notions of gender and sexuality so well observed in *Grace Before Jones*, I decided to interview two professional drag queens on what their art means to them. Based at The Scene, an LGBTQ+ venue in Lincoln, the queens discuss the power of performance and how intrinsically linked it is to their identity.

In Conversation with The Witch Blair

[Photograph of a drag queen (The Witch Blair) wearing dark eye make-up, dark lipstick and dark fur-textured clothing, as well as a black head covering adorned with a feather and skull accessory.]

[Photograph of the same drag queen, positioned to expose more of her profile than in the above image.]

How long have you been doing drag?

The first time I did anything approaching drag was when I was 17, in a school panto. My first exposure to drag was watching Lily Savage on *Blankety Blank*. She was a stand-up comic first and foremost, it was a character, you know: 'I am Lily Savage, and I am a woman' rather than a drag queen.

So how did The Witch Blair come about?

So, my act now (career-wise) was born at The Scene in Lincoln about six or seven years ago.

How would you describe The Witch Blair and your drag?

Well, it's very gender-bendy, or lazy depending on whether you like me or not. I'm not concerned with looking like a woman. To me it's clowning and a way to add to the comedy that I do and also to express my gender identity and my sexuality, but it's up to me how I do that.

How do you think drag ties in with the idea of rebellion?

Drag was a very rebellious thing from the start, a statement. That is why I have an issue with shows like [*Ru Paul's*] *Drag Race* as I feel like they try and appeal to a larger mainstream audience rather than praising what makes it so special.

I think it has had its time and, in my opinion, it has kind of betrayed its responsibility to the [LGBTQ+] community.

Do you think drag or gay culture's increased popularity in mainstream media is a good thing?

You have always had people who absorb drag as freak shows or something to gawp at, and that still happens. Hen dos for example, you know, they are trying to touch you and it's just horrific. Also, just in terms of sitcoms, gay characters were always there for comic relief, which some people find disgusting, but I think it is brilliant because if you introduce something that has been demonised for so long and make it funny, charming and friendly, that's the best way to make people relax about it. And then slowly – and it was quite slowly – gay characters can just be that, and those roles would have their voices amplified. So it was more inclusive. Comedy in particular is a way to portray a message without people getting defensive and I think that is something UK drag was always so good for. My drag is political. A lot of my jokes and covers [of songs] are a commentary on the government, so being heard must be a good thing.

Do you think your drag is inherently political, aside from the script addressing political subjects?

Just the act of getting into drag is a political statement. I did a gig once where they instructed me 'do not be political' so I stood up and spoke about gay rights for 20 minutes. My response was: if you think my rights are a matter of politics, I'll take my pay cheque now, I'm going home. Equal rights for any minority group is not a matter of politics and it never should be, it's just a matter of common basic decency.

[Black and white photograph of The Witch Blair performing on stage, spotlights in the surrounding darkness, holding a microphone, wearing a sheer blouse, long skirt and a head covering.]

How do you feel when you are wearing make-up?

Well, for a long time I was really terrible at the make-up, but it isn't about that for me. Firstly, it lets me dip into that other aspect of my gender identity and secondly, it's like clowning. It helps bring out that side of my personality, and also you can see my face and it emphasises my expressions which is key for being on stage!

Why do you think you do drag?

I knew from a young age I was funny. I used that to make other kids [in school] laugh and I was quite socially awkward but that seemed to make them relate to me more and want to get to know me. I suppose that helped me discover my personality. I spent a long time mirroring social interaction and trying to be someone, but the one thing that always felt like it was mine and *me*, was comedy. It was something I could give and share, and it made other people happy and in turn helped me feel valid.

So, would you say the response from your audience plays a large part in that?

Oh, definitely, I take a huge amount of pride in the fact that, no matter how bad someone's day has been, I could potentially make them smile and I think that's quite a wonderful thing to be able to do. Anyone who has the misfortune of bumping into me can hopefully walk away with a smile on their

face. I used to really beat myself up for having a performing arts degree, but I have come to realise I don't need to try and change the world, but I *can* try and change someone's day! Drag helped me find that, it helped me validate my own existence to myself and my output into the world.

[Illustration of The Witch Blair wearing dark clothing, make-up and a feather-adorned head-covering.]

More about The Witch Blair

Favourite song to listen to:

Gokuraku Jodo by Garnidelia. I'm a big fan of J-Pop and this song about singing and dancing in the land of eternal youth and beauty always makes me smile.

Favourite song to perform to:

Oogie Boogie's Song from *The Nightmare Before Christmas*. It's campy, spooky and so much fun to sing.

Favourite movie:

This is a tricky one but I probably have to say *Pan's Labyrinth*. I'm a big fan of old-school folk tales, the dark and gritty stories that were told before Disney got their hands on them!

Something you would tell your younger self:

Being you is enough. Instead of focusing on trying to be what people like, focus on finding and celebrating who you really are.

Idol or role model:

This is a toss-up between two fictional characters hah! *Granny Weatherwax* from the *Discworld* novels or Yuuko Ichihara from *XXXHolic*. Two witches who know what really matters.

[Graphical version of an interviewee's quote, in large pink and green text on a black background: 'Instead of focusing on trying to be what people like, focus on finding and celebrating who you really are.']

In Conversation with Lin Gerie

[Photograph of a blonde drag queen (Lin Gerie) posing, wearing white lingerie, stockings, and a set of white feathered wings.]

[Photograph of the same drag queen, smiling and raising one hand up while resting the other on her hip, lit with pink and green light.]

How long have you been doing drag?

When it comes to drag, I don't think there was ever a conscious moment where it began, it just kind of happened. If someone was to ask me, what was the pivotal moment where my drag career started, I could not tell you! But I think the first time I did... you know, 'drag drag' [what we know as drag in the mainstream media] was probably around three years ago. But well before that I was going to see the likes of *Rocky Horror Picture Show*, and it kind of progressed to the state we are in now!

So how did Lin Gerie come about?

I've always been obsessed with suspenders and stockings... this is gonna sound really weird, but my mum would always wear them to work, and I think a lot of people associate them with sex, but I just think it's a really classy look! But ultimately, lingerie is mostly all I wear so I just liked the play on words. All my drag has been based in Lincoln, really, just from meeting people through other shows I have done, and I suppose [The Scene] was the first LGBTQ+ venue I got involved with.

What do you think makes drag so appealing to you?

I think for me it is escapism. A lot of us [queens], we aren't *that* sort of person when you meet us. You know, a lot of people might be anxious or quiet, but performing allows them to be the personality they want to be, kind of hidden behind a mask. You can be whoever you want, as confident as you want, whilst keeping the *real* you safe.

So, do you think yourself and Lin Gerie are two separate identities or do the two ever overlap?

Oh, I think the two definitely merge, I sometimes struggle to differentiate between me and Lin!

That's really interesting. Do you mean in your everyday life and/or whilst on stage?

Erm, at times in my day-to-day life, yeah. I think [Lin's] given me a lot more confidence [when I'm] out of drag and at one point maybe I became quite arrogant, but that is where I humble myself, and I think the two complement each other really nicely. You learn where is appropriate for one and where is appropriate for the other!

How do you think drag ties in with the idea of rebellion?

I think it is *me* subconsciously rebelling. When you've been pushed on one narrative, being masculine for example, I think that is why I do what I do – wanting to change and push that set narrative and rebel. I also think people forget drag is political, people have struggled to get us to this point and that's really important to recognise beneath all the fun and glam.

[Photograph of Lin Gerie wearing a long, fitted and colourful dress, standing in front of coloured lights and a rainbow-coloured fabric backdrop, one arm raised and the other on a hip.]

How do you feel about drag being more accessible in mainstream media?

I think it's great that drag is becoming more mainstream because it encourages more people to be more open about themselves and try new things! I think it is important to view shows like *Drag Race* through a critical lens but, ultimately, the exposure is a positive thing.

How would you respond to the critique that drag is disempowering to women?

I think drag as we know it now, especially the drag I do, can be really empowering because, as a young gay man who lacks confidence, choosing to do drag I think really reflects how strong women are and shows so much appreciation for them. I've been raised by women and I think a lot of my confidence comes from, like, my grandmother, mum and sister. And I think a lot of what my drag represents is in solidarity to women and their strength.

[Illustration of Lin Gerie wearing green make-up and with blonde hair.]

More about Lin Gerie

Favourite song:

Wig in a Box from *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* because the whole song itself is about getting back on your feet after a setback. Given that she's a drag queen it hit me really hard personally. It's also about leaving worries behind and enjoying life.

If your life had a theme tune:

Cabaret from *Cabaret*.

Favourite movie:

Hedwig and the Angry Inch. It's such an inspiring and powerful film that helped me find who I am. Its message is amazing.

Something I would have told my younger self:

Not to let other people's opinions affect you and not to be afraid of being yourself.

Idol or inspiration

Julian Clary.

[Photograph of two young women, one wears a black trouser suit and tie while the other wears red trousers and a light grey blazer. They are standing side by side at a red shopfront in daylight.]

[Black and white photograph shows a close-up of the same two young women, standing casually, looking at the camera, positioned below their gaze.]

[Black and white photograph shows a mirror reflection of a young woman wearing a trouser suit and tie.]

Fashion Has No Gender

Photography and words by Rosie Baird

As a fashion photographer, I believe that fashion is highly influential. I'm highlighting the current movement to dispel gender norms – not just in fashion but in everyday life, too. Clothes are genderless, so expressing individuality through them should not be limited by gender. The image of powerful women in stereotypically 'masculine' outfits sends a positive, commanding message that this revolution is here to stay.

[Photograph shows a close-up of a young woman wearing a suit and tie, raising both arms up and looking into the distance. It is daytime and behind her are buildings and blue sky.]

[Photograph shows two women in wide-legged stances, in front of a black shopfront in daylight.]

[Black and white photograph shows a close-up of a woman's torso and head, extending her arms and gaze towards the camera below her.]

[Black and white photograph of a woman wearing a trouser suit and tie, holding her hands behind her head, in a wide-legged stance, on an urban footpath in daylight.]

[Photograph shows two women squatting outside, close to each other, looking down at the camera in front of a tall window in daylight.]

Jimmy Robert and the Progression of Gender and Racial Equality: Timeline

Written by Nadine Kersey

1975

Jimmy Robert is born in Guadeloupe, and later moves to live in Paris.

1980s

Difference feminism is developed, suggesting that men and women can be both different and equal.

1981

The beginning of the AIDS epidemic, sparking hatred and fear of the queer community.

1996

Robert moves to London, UK, to study visual arts at Goldsmiths College and experiences a wider sense of representation as a Black artist.

1999

Robert graduates from London's Goldsmiths College.

2001

Germany recognises civil partnerships for same-sex couples, and the country's first openly gay politician, Klaus Wowereit, is elected Mayor of Berlin.

2004

Robert collaborates with artist and performer Ian White in their hour-long performance *6 Things We Couldn't Do, But Can Do Now* at Tate Britain and MoMA (Museum of Modern Art, New York City).

2005

Robert graduates from Rijksakademie, Amsterdam, and moves to live and work in Berlin, Germany.

2008

Robert presents his exhibition *Figure de Style* for Cubitt Artists gallery in London, a rework of Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1965).

Barack Obama becomes the first Black president of the United States.

2013

Ian White passes away after a long battle with cancer.

The Black Lives Matter movement is launched, and the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act is passed in the UK.

2017

Robert presents *Imitation of Lives*, a montage staged at Philip Johnson's Glass House in Manhattan which centres around architecture, visibility and Black representation.

2019

Robert presents *Joie Noire* in Berlin, the first of a three-part series dedicated to the late Ian White, with specific reference to AIDS, activism, gender and race.

The piece includes tracks from artists such as Grace Jones.

2020

Robert launches his exhibition *Akimbo* at Nottingham Contemporary, the largest presentation of his work in the UK, exploring themes such as racialised and gendered readings of the body.

[Photograph shows a colour print of artist Jimmy Robert, shirtless and hairless, looking down and tilting his head forward. The print is held against a white wall by a wooden plank and bends away from the wall.]

[Photograph of an artwork by Jimmy Robert. An image of Jimmy Robert's body is printed onto a cylindrical structure. The structure is placed on a shallow, flat, square platform.]

Jimmy Robert and Inclusivity

Written by Olivia Ghattak

[Photograph shows a close-up detail of an artwork by Jimmy Robert. The image shows a fabric curtain with a busy and predominantly brown pattern.]

Jimmy Robert is a Guadeloupe-born French artist based in Berlin. The way he presents his work is performance-like, making it a tangible, walk-through experience for the viewer. He practises in mixed media such as drawing, collage, photography, video, sculpture and performance. He also showcases these pieces in abstract ways, for example an image rolled over a plank of wood projecting from the wall. He achieves the transitions in art form by sometimes presenting one piece of artwork across a room, with all elements in different media.

Objects and artwork merge into one in much of Robert's work. He also makes sly references to the past when Black bodies were not often seen (especially in Western art) and makes them a core part of his work, sometimes using his own body. He states that by doing so, he himself can choose 'how I want this Black gay male body to be seen' (*Pin-Up 27* magazine, Fall Winter 2019/20), without risk of misrepresentation. This style of work strongly presents his ideas of identity and inclusion. Much of his work also involves other subjects performing, not just Robert himself, which is then captured as part of the artwork.

[Photograph shows artist Jimmy Robert wearing a brown t-shirt, sitting behind a table, holding an irregularly cut piece of paper in front of the top half of his face.]

Robert's exhibitions often feature a large curtain with a repeated pattern taken from small sections of Marcel Duchamp's paintings, suggesting he wants visitors to have a more intimate, in-depth experience. The curtain almost turns the room into a theatrical set, complementing his key style of performing and telling a story with his art. It breaks up the room, almost forcing people to acknowledge the space around them.

He likes to make people question the way they position themselves whilst viewing his work, making the elements almost like obstacles, for example sticking out from a wall. Viewers feel they have a role in interpreting and mapping out an understanding of his work.

Robert references many topics that, sadly, even today may be regarded as taboo. For example, there is often a focus on vulnerability and how this is often seen as an unattractive trait in a man. His art works to change this ideology.

Feminism is another topic which Robert's work touches upon, using feminist art as an inspiration. Inclusion is a key theme of his work, which is why he uses racially- and gender-diverse subjects and frequently uses minority groups.

Robert's use of diverse and minority subjects creates an inclusive showcase of work. This is something that must be commended and, hopefully, in the future more artists will follow in his footsteps, as it is crucial for society to move towards making these groups part of the majority.

[Photograph of an artwork by Jimmy Robert. The image shows a black and white print of a photograph of his body, stretched out across the base of a public monument. The printed photograph is draped over a horizontal wooden pole attached to a white wall.]

It Was All Practice

Written by Brandon Fuller

Introduction

Identity and expression are both themes explored throughout Robert's *Akimbo* and Jones's *Grace Before Jones*, encouraging me to explore the life of an individual whose creative practice embodies these same ideals.

Passionate, creative and determined. Just some of the attributes that can be used to describe Jimmi Darbyshire. Currently a Fine Art student studying at Nottingham Trent University, Darbyshire is successfully pursuing his passion to become a world-renowned artist, taking each necessary step to fulfil his long-term aspirations. This interview provides insights into Darbyshire's personal experiences within the art community, experiences growing up and his development as a practising artist.

Discussing the Art Community

'Under-representation cannot be solved, it can only be helped.'

Art is such a subjective field, so how can one possibly determine what is good and what is bad? It is this conflict that inspires Darbyshire. He alludes to how 'competition is motivation' for himself because people within this community are constantly battling to have their voices and crafts presented to the public. He also refers to the difficulty of upcoming artists pursuing a creative field, mentioning how 'the job role of Picasso is already filled by Picasso'. The fact that we still revere the works of artists such as Picasso creates such a struggle for creatives to emerge, but it then becomes a question of how we begin to identify the next Picasso.

Growing Up

'Her faith made me want to do well.'

Art is something that we all innately participate in growing up, grabbing that first pencil or crayon to begin small doodles, or experimenting with

fingerpainting at school. No matter the method, we all do it. Darbyshire says that, whilst growing up, he 'used [his] TV as a lightbox because [he] really wanted a poster'. This experimentation in his early years grew and grew, so that his 'bedroom walls were covered in A4 pieces of paper', ranging from traced images to original characters he designed. What began as a hobby rapidly developed into creating the stunning pieces of fine art that we see today.

[Photograph of artist Jimmi Darbyshire looking down, with his head tilted to the side. He is wearing sunglasses and a red and black flannel shirt, and there are rooftops on the background.]

[Expressive oil painting of three figures sitting on the sofa. The central figure is upside down. The bodies and the faces of the figures are blurred, due to the large brushstrokes.]

[Expressive oil painting of a close-up of a person's profile. The person's eyes are closed and their skin is rendered through colourful brushstrokes against a background of zigzag stripes.]

Around the age of 14, the daunting day of selecting GCSE options comes around for all high-school students. For Darbyshire, this day saw him select business studies, history and ICT. After much discontent with business studies, he pleaded with his mother to allow a change to art, and he remembers how she believed it was 'a hobby that fizzles out'. Darbyshire's determination to make this change became evident to his mother. All it took was for her to notice the paper-covered walls of his bedroom to quickly change her mind. At

the time, this change may have seemed miniscule, but it was this change that led him to many great achievements within the art community: an A* grade at both high school and sixth form, commissions from the Blackpool Tower and an online following that has been cultivated over several years.

Developing an Artistic Practice

‘Paintings can tell a story.’

Darbyshire’s practice originally began with ‘large-scale portraits that filled the window’, with media such as oil, acrylic and charcoal. *Sleep Magnifique* is a prime example of his portrait work, the size alone having a prominent presence when displayed alongside other pieces. This piece utilises fragments of a mirror to draw a connection between the artist and viewers, allowing them to reflect upon themselves via the common experience of sleep.

Darbyshire adopted these larger portraits as his main practice because ‘sketchbooks [felt] quite limiting’. It was only recently that he began to experiment with other styles of painting, for instance the narrative style present in *Aftermath*.

Aftermath features an array of characters on a sofa. The painting attempts to convey the aftermath of a party, indicated by the alcohol present. This painting was Darbyshire’s first attempt at a more narrative piece of art, a piece he is ‘really proud of’. When displayed to others in his class, the painting got ‘ripped apart’ with criticisms, a lecturer commenting that it resembled ‘a cheap commercial gallery painting’. Comments such as these impacted Darbyshire’s morale and his motivation to experiment with narration, his creativity declining for several months after the production of *Aftermath*.

Following this, he realised that he had lost sight of his original inspiration as an artist, confidently saying: 'I will paint what I want'. A creative surge occurred during the COVID-19 lockdown, encouraging a more surreal shift in his work, most noticeable within *Welcome Home*. This work 'tries to see the light of lockdown' by presenting three individuals joined together as one, conveyed via the aura-like lines surrounding the trio. The lockdown is something we have all had to endure and adapt to, something that Darbyshire has captured in a unique manner.

Closing Message

Interviewing Darbyshire was a delight. We had many meaningful conversations and I hope readers can take away some key messages after reading this piece.

[Expressive oil painting of three identical figures sitting cross-legged with their backs touching, painted against a plain red background.]

Readers of *Response* can find Darbyshire's work on both Instagram (@Jimmidarby_Art) and Etsy (Jimmi Darbyshire Art).

[Photograph of a young man, gazing calmly at the camera, holding his hands up to the camera, framing his face. He wears red and cream eye make-up, with the red eyeshadow carried down onto his cheeks and adorned with red hearts and dots.]

Photography by Rosie Baird

Expectation/Expression

Photography by Rosie Baird

'I think there's so much masculinity in being vulnerable and allowing yourself to be feminine, and I'm very comfortable with that.'

Harry Styles, *Teen Vogue*, 1 Nov 2018

[Photograph of a young man, gazing calmly at the camera, touching his short hair with his left hand. He wears cream and red eye make-up, with the red eyeshadow carried down onto his cheeks and adorned with red hearts and dots.]

[Photograph of young man touching his hair with his hand while closing his eyes to reveal a red eyeshadow outline, cream-coloured eyelids and red eyeliner. The red eyeshadow is continued onto his cheeks and decorated with red hearts and dots.]

As well as repressively defining how men should act, toxic masculinity also sets expectations for how men should look and dress.

Unhidden

Photography and words by Rosie Baird

[Photograph of a shirtless young man outdoors, looking solemnly into the distance while holding a sheer rainbow fabric wrapped around his body and raised up by his right arm. He wears a pearl necklace and glitter on his cheeks.]

‘... all genders can express their femininity without judgement.’

[Black and white photograph shows a young man, side on, eyes closed, tilting his head up and sitting in front of a body of water and a fallen tree in daylight. He wears a lacy blouse and pearl necklace.]

[Black and white photograph of a young man wearing a crop-top and trousers, sitting in front of a rock wall in daylight, staring solemnly at the camera.]

I created this body of work to show how important it is that people of all genders can express their femininity without judgement. This subject is very important to me as I have many male friends who feel ashamed to express their feminine side due to society’s standards and expectations. In these images, Kyle is wearing typically female clothes and accessories: a crop top, a lacy shirt and a pearl necklace. To look like a cape, I also wrapped a delicate rainbow fabric around him. I have deliberately created an unapologetic tone and sense of freedom in the images through the use of his body language: Kyle fills most of the frame, not hiding any part of himself.

[Photograph shows a close-up of a young man’s face and hands. He holds his hands around his face, with sheer rainbow fabric wrapped around his hands. His fingernails are painted with pastel colours and he wears glitter on his cheeks.]

To Be Free

Written by Jason Shadbolt

Illustration by Bethany Bell

[Illustration of two people kissing.]

As free as leaves that blow in the wind,
as free as the birds that whistle and sing.
Free to express yourself in all of your colours,
free within your body, or free as lovers.
Pursuing this freedom and keeping it safe,
keeping it from those who judge or hate.

Identity is pure, the purest on earth,
something that is given at the moment of birth.
Through life you change, grow and mature,
to become your own person, confident and sure.
It is important to remember, important to say,
no-one should be afraid to live life their way.

Whatever your appearance and whoever you are,
you deserve to be heard and to be your own star.
To express yourself in any way you choose,
as not being yourself is only to lose.
To be free as the birds, the leaves in the sky,
to be true to your identity, which you cannot deny.

Credits: Photography

Front Cover:

Grace Jones in concert, Dublin, 2018, www.dreamstime.com

Grace Jones performing at Suikerrock, 2010, www.dreamstime.com

Jimmy Robert, *Untitled (Ompdrailles)*, 2013. Photography: Sam Kirby.

Jimmy Robert, *Paramètres (still)*, 2012. HD video, sound 5 minutes 20 seconds.

Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin.

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Richard Bernstein, *Grace Jones Photograph for On Your Knees*, 1979. Eric

Bowman courtesy of The Estate of Richard Bernstein.

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Grace Jones in concert, Dublin, 2018, www.dreamstime.com

Grace Jones Timeline.

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Jean-Paul Goude, *Blue black in black on brown (New York)*, 1981.

Painted photograph. Install shot of *Grace Before Jones: Camera, Disco, Studio* at Nottingham Contemporary, 2020. Photography: Lewis Ronald.

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By Dave Gould, Grace Jones performing on Main Stage of 2016 FYF Festival at Exposition Park, Los Angeles, CA.

Identity and Grace in 2020

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Anthony Barboza, *Grace Jones, NYC, 1970s*. Courtesy of Anthony Barboza Photography.

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Photography: Rosa Pineda, 2020.

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Photography: Annette Bernhardt, 2020.

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Photography: Fibonacci Blue, from Minnesota, USA, 2020.

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Photography: Rosa Pineda, 2020.

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Photography: Annette Bernhardt, 2020.

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Dale Cooper Photography

Jimmy Robert and the Progression of Gender and Racial Equality:

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Jimmy Robert, *Untitled (Plié II)*, 2020. Photography: Sam Kirby.

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Photography Sam Kirby.

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Jimmy Robert, *Paramètres (still)*, 2012. HD video, sound 5 minutes 20 seconds.

Courtesy of the artist and Tanya Leighton, Berlin.

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Jimmy Robert, *Descendances Du Nu (Velvet)*, 2016 (Element 2 of 3).

Descendances Du Nu (Wood Panels with Prints), 2016 (Element 3 of 3).

Photography: Sam Kirby.

It Was All Practice

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Jimmi Darbyshire, *Welcome Home*, 2020. Oil on Canvas. Photography: Jimmi Darbyshire.

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A special thanks to Weronika Bargieł and other staff at Nottingham Contemporary for their guidance and support.

[Back cover has the logos for Nottingham Contemporary and Nottingham Trent University]