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The fabric of time



Artist using quilting to explore centuries of black history

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Lewisham artist Jahnavi Inniss celebrates black history through quilting

She has 'never encountered an art form that has so much cultural relevance for black women', writes Maxine Brigue



A Lewisham artist is using quilting to explore centuries of black British history.

Jahnavi Inniss is a 27-year-old Central Saint Martins alum who grew up and is based in Catford, working in her studio in Lewisham Arthouse.

Whilst volunteering at the Black Cultural Archives in Brixton, Inniss was struck by the number of black figures from the 17th and 18th centuries that she had not learned about in school, so she chose to use her graphic design skills to share their stories.

She told us: "People should care about black history because it's part of the national story. Black people have a place in Britain. We have contributed to this country. We have built this country, and people need to know that because it creates a sense of empowerment."

Through her art, Inniss uses a critical lens to challenge historical narratives and create representation for black Brits.

The graphic designer said she settled on quilting as the 'perfect medium due to its direct links to black history.'

"I have never encountered an art form that has so much cultural relevance for black women, because it was a way for black women to express themselves creatively," she said.

"For example, enslaved people created quilts with secret communication devices that would tell people how to escape to North America. My work tells the history of black quilting whilst also telling black history."

Inniss facilitates artistic workshops around the UK for organisations such as Craft Council England, Tate Britain, the South London Gallery and the Fitzwilliam Museum.

This summer, the artist became the family space artist in residence at the South London Gallery, where she led free workshops for children aged five to 12 to create quilt blocks

for the gallery's large-scale quilt project.

Inniss' largest piece, The Black British History Quilt, spans 11 metres and features the names of 34 black historical figures from a range of time periods, including the Victorian, Tudor, Elizabethan, Stewart and Georgian.

The Black British History Quilt was displayed in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge over the summer as part of their 'Rise Up: Resistance, Revolution, Abolition' exhibition.

Inniss said: "I wanted to challenge the narrative that black people only arrived in Britain during the Windrush period because that time is often framed as when black people began to contribute to British society, which is not true. Black people have been contributing to British society for centuries before the 1950s."

For each square, she used fabric related to the figure's time period. She also chose a specific typeface inspired by the signage at Martin Luther King Jr.'s last recorded speech during the Memphis Sanitation strikes of 1968.

"History helps us to have a sense of self because if we can understand where we've come from, then we can feel like we deserve to be here," she explained.

For her next piece, the artist is looking to explore local black history in Lewisham – a project that is set to be released next summer.

"When you know the history of your community, it provides a sense of empowerment and belonging," she added.

On 23rd October, Inniss will run a workshop at Republic London in Tower Hamlets, exploring quilting as a tool for storytelling.

Inniss regularly shares information about her workshops and commissions on her website www.jahnavi-inniss.com/Workshops-1 and Instagram: @jahnavinniss.



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