

DESCENT: *an exploration of depths*

George Vasey in Conversation with Ugonna Hosten, April 2022

George Vasey (G): What was your route into being an artist?

Ugonna Hosten (H): I have a background in criminology and have always had an interest in the human mind. I'm fascinated by people's motivations. I wanted to work in intelligence but realised quite quickly that I wasn't fulfilled so it sparked off another journey. Around the same time, I became a mum. The time away from my usual work routine offered up an opportunity to think about what I really wanted to do, so I started up a fashion accessories label. Through this I realised that there was a lot attached to the meaning of fabric; thinking about the provenance of fabrics and genealogies. This threw up lots of questions for me and to cut a long story very short; I ended up in art because it married my specific interests and it enabled me to think deeply about questions around identity and philosophy. It was a meandering route.

G: The scenic path! You're very scholarly but your practice is embedded in making. When we've talked previously you often mention lots of reading materials that I have to go away and research. I'm interested in what comes first. What is the process?

U: I love reading. I love words. I see reading as a way of entering another space. When I'm reading, I'm consuming and through making I'm trying to process that knowledge through the body. I want to feel it. I don't want to live in my head, I want to work with my hands.

G: How do the collages, prints and drawings feed into each other?

U: I start with collages. Early on I would lift images from magazines but more recently I often collage my own photographs. Collage is a place where I can play and freely associate and make connections. The process is alchemical — dissolving things and putting them back together — I'm trying to break an image down and almost boil it down to its essence. The drawings are often based on the collages and through drawing I'm trying to learn about the images. Drawing helps me enter the spaces that the collages create. This process is often followed by a period of reflection where I read and try to make sense of what I've done. Really, I'm trying to create space that enables the work to grow organically. I don't seek information; I'm flirting

with all of these subject matters from various sources whether it be literature, music, alchemy, psychology. All kinds of stuff. I'm interested in serendipity.

G: I love that idea of flirting with themes. Do you see these spaces as exterior or interior?

U: Both. I'm interested in duality. The images are of the world but I'm also trying to grasp something more than that. The process I follow informs my choice of materials: charcoal frees me up. I'm interested in creating room for something else to happen. Charcoal gives me a rich black but it also has a sculptural element to it; you can create passages and lines that are more abstract and interesting.

G: Charcoal is visceral; it's very messy.

U: It creates a less defined line that can be manipulated to suggest something more rounded. I can bend the image and I really love this aspect of charcoal.

G: It also registers your body in a different way; it bears the imprint of a hand.

U: Yes totally. All the new drawings are charcoal. I'm interested in allowing something else to emerge. You know, I honour the collages and want to keep the detail but the more I do this the more abstract they become. I can end up somewhere I don't expect which can end up triggering other works that follow particular rhythms and forms.

G: I like the way you talk about breaking down and putting back together; the sense of getting lost to find yourself somewhere interesting. You often talk about opposites.

U: Ah, yeah. I think about this relationship between drawing and printmaking. Drawing is adding to an empty page; monotype is a taking away — my particular way of working when I'm making a monotype is to ink up the plate first, then wipe an image into it. That dialogue between two opposites is an interesting one.

G: You mentioned alchemy before; could you expand on what you meant?

U: I'm really interested in alchemy and mythology. They both chronicle life experiences and stages in their own very unique way through metaphors. It triggers my imagination and it's a way of seeking to understand my connection to an ancient lineage.

G: What's important to you as an artist?

U: I want to connect to something that is eternal. I grew up in a Christian home. I don't practice a particular religion now; I am in tune with a greater divinity. I consider myself to be a very spiritual person. Flow is very important. For instance; I love colour but I'm very sensitive to how it changes under different light — with black and white it's the same; I can just focus on the marks and the image; I can flow with it much easier. I want to keep that directness.

G: The idea of intimacy comes to mind: this connection between your hand and the materials but also the image and trying to retain that connection.

U: Definitely. Everything about the image; even the unintentional marks, the mistakes. You have to reckon with them.

G: Mistakes is an interesting word.

U: You could call them happy accidents! Which can sometimes be an invitation to go down a different pathway with a drawing. Yes, what's also important to me is a connection to self and freedom as well. I want to express what I want to express and have a space to do that. I really need a period of incubation where I'm thinking through ideas and making work and that's my space. I don't need to talk; the work talks to me and I can listen. That freedom to listen is important.

G: You mentioned the word ancient before, could you expand on that?

U: I'm fascinated by the question of what connects the ancient to the present moment. I want to engage with my inheritance and identity as an Igbo woman. A lot of the ancient traditions and spiritual practices were viewed as demonic and nonsensical but I'm interested in reclaiming aspects of Igbo cosmology that were in place before colonialism.

G: Myths always exist in some form; they're crucial survival mechanisms for society: signaling dangers and opportunities. Knowledge is often hierarchized: people place intellect above intuition but they're not that different.

U: The show is called 'Instinctive Travels & The Paths of Rhythm' which is lifted from a Tribe Called Quest album. In terms of hierarchy of knowledge; this was where my influence came from. I came to their music when I was younger and it taught me so

much about consciousness. It was full of so much history and topical issues about the Black experience and that's where my interest was piqued around these issues. People often attack Hip-Hop but it's so innovative and full of knowledge. I see Kendrick Lamar as a poet and there is often an implicit hierarchy of knowledge applied here but knowledge has different faces.

G: Music was similarly for me a gateway drug into art and reading.

U: Music was my education. I'd go to record stores and pore over the back cover of vinyls taking note of features and producers. This was years before Google. You really had to do the work to discover your interests. The music directed me to the library where I'd take out books on Malcolm X etc. It was a journey into this material that started with music that I wasn't learning about in school.

G: Music is an alternative curriculum. It's interesting you mention Kendrick Lamar; he has won the Pulitzer Prize, the largest international prize for a writer. What other musicians were you influenced by?

U: Mos Def, Common Sense, Talib Kweli. People who have a message behind their lyrics.

G: I could talk all day about music. Back to the work! Do you have a specific audience in mind when you're making work?

U: When I'm making the work it's an insular process. It's like dancing in front of a mirror. I wouldn't be as free if I felt someone was watching. Once the work is made, I do want it to connect to people. The work is about this dual sense of us: as physical and spiritual beings. I guess in a sense the audience would be someone who is fascinated by this idea.

G: What does spirituality look like to you?

U: It's a higher energy. I've felt that when I was at my peak with running and I've felt it listening to music. Spirituality to me is acknowledging there exists a higher power and devoting oneself in service of that higher power – it's the act of choosing love.

G: Emotion is somatic and socially constructed. You could say that society has taken an emotional turn; people are more attuned to how they feel, they're more connected to it. In this sense feeling isn't just about something personal it also has a

political dimension.

U: Yeah. I'm interested in how this feeling connects to our ancestry; understanding where I'm coming from and where I'm going. The genesis of the exhibition was the work 'Room to Unravel', 2021. The work was made after the unexpected loss of a sibling and I was reflecting on the big questions. The work is an invitation to descend. Who do you encounter when you descend? I'm thinking of a descent as a place where things can be revealed. I'm trying to make sense of these life experiences that shake us and make us feel like we're standing on water.

G: The new drawings seem more enigmatic. There is less clarity and the mark making is more open and gestural. Parts of the image become abstract. There is also a sense of re-growth in the works. Your work sits between things: human and animal, vegetation and mineral.

U: I find this space really exciting. I'm interested in writers and artists who occupy these liminal spaces. People like John O'Donohue. What I love about his writing is that he's interested in Celtic mythology and his writing is really incredible.

G: Have you read Robert MacFarlane's 'Underland'?

U: Some of it! It's so beautifully written. He really captures the sense of descent not as a place of deprivation but as a place of revelation.

G: This movement down rather than up is interesting: down suggests something bodily where the air and sky have often been seen more celestially.

U: I love these rich metaphors which are about travelling and looking in. I hope this connects with audiences. You know, we've just been through a pandemic and we were asked to do this collective descent: being forced to be by ourselves and look inward. We've all been asked to look within and find something that can get us through this incredibly dark period. We're always going to be invited to go to places we don't know.

Ugonna Hosten is an artist based in London. Recent exhibitions include Royal Academy Summer Exhibition (group 2021), Woolwich Contemporary Print Fair (group 2021).

George Vasey is a curator and writer. He has worked in museums and galleries across the UK in curatorial and learning departments since 2009. His writing regularly

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