

# Kadeem Oak



## Effra Creek! Effra Wash! Effra Splash!

ICA Theatre, Saturday 19 March, 7pm

*Effra Creek! Effra Wash! Effra Splash!* (2022) is a newly commissioned film installation work that reflects upon the River Effra, a lost tributary of the London Thames. The project examines the cultural and sonic ecology of the river's course as it runs from Norwood, through Brixton to Vauxhall. The work explores Afro-Caribbean histories and themes of industry, community, landscape and memory.

## Q&A

**Where did the ideas for your work in *Image Behaviour* come from?**

The ideas around the work started to develop during my time living in Brixton. I often draw inspiration from subject matter within my immediate locality and during that time I started to notice a recurrence in signage, road names, pub names, everyday things which denote the Effra River and water in general (Effra Road, Atlantic Road, Brixton Water Lane and so on) but I found it curious that there wasn't any obvious visible stream flowing through Brixton. I also have vivid memories of visiting Brixton as a child and getting a sense of the strong Caribbean community there. My motivation for the film was really to examine ways of thinking about this invisible river through a cultural and metaphorical lens – thinking about time, erosion, disappearing or marginalised communities, geological change, migration and identity among other things.

**Is the Effra River a new subject for you, or is it something that you explore in other works?**

My first exploration into the Effra as a subject matter for making work was in a film I made called *Brixton Lift*, which I made at the artist workers' cooperative not/nowhere, formerly No.w.here Bethnal Green in 2014. The film incorporated a mix of 16mm film, SD video and hand-drawn illustrations; and documented the now discontinued/shutdown and conveniently called Brixton Splash celebration, an annual street party which took place from 2006 to 2015 in commemoration of Jamaican Independence Day. The street party was located along much of the route of the Effra and I think it's here where I started to make that connection between the ecology of the river and the cultural occurrences which ebb

and flow above ground. This work is currently on display at Cubitt Gallery as part of Languid Hands' curatorial fellowship programme No Real Closure.

**Can you tell me a little bit about your practice more broadly? Are you working predominantly with moving image?**

I enjoy working with moving image however I don't feel too loyal to one particular medium. I find it easier to understand and communicate ideas with the filmed and photographed image over other mediums. I enjoy that visual language and I'm interested in developing ways of thinking about moving image within the context of sculpture, installation, sound, discovery, collaboration and social documentation. My practice is about working with the vernacular and reconfiguration of artists' moving image, storytelling and experimental documentation. I like to examine the ways in which we share and articulate a sense of place through themes such as time, locality, sound and ecology while exploring new perspectives on Black British identity and a diasporic heritage today within a framework of nature and landscape.

**Is the idea of place something that comes up regularly in your work?**

Yes, I think it is important as a mechanism for your own self discovery as well as finding ways for your work to resonate with others. I made a video piece called *Metal Work* which was filmed in Kelham Island, Sheffield. It is one of the oldest industrial manufacturing sites in the city (where I grew up) and it still has the steam engine (now situated in a heritage museum) that my grandfather worked on after migrating from Jamaica to Sheffield in the '50s. That film focuses on themes of redundant forms of production and the dichotomy between labour and leisure. And more recently I made a film called *Le Mistral Wind* which takes the historic port city of Marseille as a significant site in Afro-pean history, recording the geology of the Calanques (a coastal area) which points across the Mediterranean Sea towards Algeria, Northern Africa. The film is a short document, recording joyful moments of a Black Marseillais family playing by the sea. Nothing really happens, however it felt like an important record. At the time, I'd been reading a lot of accounts from Black writers and their experience of living in or travelling to Europe such as James Baldwin, Frantz Fanon and Johny Pitts, which influenced that work.

**And can you talk a little bit about your process of making?**

Work for *Effra Creek! Effra Wash! Effra Splash!* started by gaining a good physical understanding of the course of the river. I walked the route numerous times and I feel like on those journeys, looking for real indications of the route, almost became a performative aspect of the work in itself. I sourced several books on the history of the river, its uses and changes in perception from pre-medieval London to its submergence in the mid-1800s. I was able to work with several collaborators in the production of this work, something which I haven't done too much of before. The illustrated map that features in the film was created by graphic designer Matthew Lewis (Creative Director of *It's Freezing in LA!*, a climate change magazine) and was drawn from maps found in the Lambeth Council Archives and the work of archivist Jon Newman. The digital renderings of Brixton cultural artefacts was created by digital artist Jason Ramanah (Unreal Explorations). The linocut motifs were drawn by artist Jack Fawdry Tatham with sound design by the artist cooperative Black Shuck.

My work often starts out with a specific intention or atmosphere that I'd like to communicate on screen. For example, much of the film was shot using an ultra-wide angle lens, a choice I made because I wanted the viewer to feel enveloped by the expansive landscape images on screen while still being able to register a level of warped intimacy and closeness to the subject simultaneously. When it comes to editing, for me the filmed footage doesn't always have to be perfect, it's just a starting point from which to collage and manipulate the image. Once the editing process is underway, I begin to think about the best installation situation that will support the ideas within the film.

**How involved do you get in the edit? Is that something you work on yourself or do you work with people on that?**

I enjoy editing my own film work as a way of moulding the narrative, gaining a real understanding of how to communicate certain ideas, and to establish a specific rhythm. I think editing is a really important skill to keep building on in my own practice. For this film I'm also working with Black Shuck in this regard, in a consultation capacity.

**What about the presentation format?**

I think the flexibility that presenting this work in a space like the ICA Theatre provides is a good fit for my ideas around being able to experiment with the presentation of moving-image work in an immersive and haptic context. The ambitions of the Image Behaviour programme sit well with my own interest in the history of artists' moving-image production and forms of storytelling. I see this format of event-type moving image presentation as a kind of showcase of my experiments and a space to trial new things. Following this I'd like to show the work for a longer duration in an exhibition format.

I'm incorporating a variety of graphic mediums into the film project. While mainly filming in 4K digital video, the work employs a medley of graphic mediums: handmade linocut motifs, virtually rendered 3D graphics, drone footage, archive photography, 16mm hand painted film, cartography and elements of found and previous work made about/in Brixton/The Effra. In the space alongside the film sits a traditional Jamaican sound system, one that you would find on the Notting Hill Carnival parade floats (trucks), which will play the soundtrack of the film.

**Without giving too much away, how would you describe your new work?**

My film installation *Effra Creek! Effra Wash! Effra Splash!* reflects upon the River Effra, which is a lost tributary of the London Thames. The title denotes the different names that the Effra had along the course of its route: The Washway, Vauxhall Creek, among others. The project examines the cultural and sonic ecology of the river's course as it runs from Norwood, through Brixton to Vauxhall. Much of the Effra now resides underground having been intercepted by London's underground sewer system in the 19th century; however it can be heard and seen at specific sites, at its source along Norwood Ridge and down through the Lambeth area. The work explores Afro-Caribbean histories and themes of industry, community, landscape and memory.

My aim for this new work was for it to feel somewhat timeless, periodless, distinctly London but void of too much human everyday traffic or distraction – I wanted the dub sound system and soundtrack to take ownership of often very painterly, even Victorian style landscape imagery on screen. I'd like to meld together the muddyness and greyness

of these London scenes (its English flora and fauna) with the sound elements of Jamaican music culture.

### **How would you explain the work to people who don't know London or the significance of Brixton?**

Brixton has one of the largest Afro-Caribbean communities in Britain; it's synonymous with Jamaican culture and the Windrush Generation. Brixton historically has been a site for social change and resistance against police brutality. Through the work it's my intention to also highlight the ongoing gentrification, out of place building developments, evictions and rising rental prices ongoing in the area and the cultural erasures happening in the community allegorically by tracking the movement and disappearance of the river as it shifted from public open space to a private hidden space.

My process of working on this film was to simply ask myself a few questions such as, if I were to make a film about something you can't see how would I go about it? How do you film/record something that is lost, forgotten, disappearing / being erased – what other senses come to the fore, what else can you emphasise and how can sound help to tell the story and how does specificity of sound signify a location, a site or community?

### **Will there be a narrative or a dialogue that makes that connection with the West Indian community in Brixton?**

One element of this can be found in the digital renderings made of food stalls and shop fronts found in Brixton Market and Atlantic Road. I've selected these fragments to be rendered digitally almost as cultural artefacts, relics; the specificity of this aesthetic is a reminder of the limitations of appropriation and imitation. In the installation you will also find images and renderings of stone circles – in sound system culture, speakers are traditionally presented in a ring or circle or stacks, something which is common place in Brixton (to this day) – but this circular formation reminds me a lot of ancient stone circles, and I'd like to cement the idea of these sound systems as a kind of ancient cultural artefact much in the same way as the ancient stone circles I've encountered in Britain's countryside. Along with the underground recorded murmurings of the Effra River I feel there's a natural internal vibration that dub/reggae music produces which resonates well between the two ideas. I feel the heavy bass sounds and vibrations in the body that these speakers create synchronise well with our connection with the ground and the underground vibrations/movements of the Effra River.

Kadeem Oak is an artist and filmmaker based in London. His work is concerned with the vernacular and reconfiguration of artist's moving image, storytelling and experimental documentation. He examines the ways in which we share and articulate a sense of place through time, locality, sound and ecology while exploring new perspectives on Black British identity and a diasporic heritage today.