

# the Whitworth

## Podcast transcript

October 2020

### A WALK IN THE PARK - EPISODE 5

*A Walk in the Park* is a podcast series from the Whitworth. A university gallery, set in parkland in central Manchester. Hosted by the Cultural Park Keeper Francine Hayfron, each episode takes a look at what is happening inside and out at the Whitworth.

#### **EPISODE 5** *A Walk In The Park - Anya Paintsil*

Continuing the discussions raised by the Black Lives Matter movement, in this next episode, we meet and chat with the artist Anya Paintsil. Anya Paintsil is a Manchester based artist, of Welsh and Ghanaian heritage, who works primarily with textiles.

Her powerful and striking work looks at themes of race and identity and so our Cultural Park Keeper, Francine Hayfron caught up with Anya over Zoom, to find out more.

#### **All of the episodes are available to listen to at:**

<https://www.mixcloud.com/TheWhitworth/playlists/a-walk-in-the-park-podcast/>

#### **Social tags:**

**Instagram** – @whitworthart @whitworthcpk1 @foldedwinguk @anyapaintsil

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**Hashtag** – #AWalkInThePark #TheWhitworthAtHome #GalleryInThePark

## **A WALK IN THE PARK**

### **EPISODE 5 - SPEAKERS**

**Francine Hayfron (FH)** - Cultural Park Keeper at The Whitworth, The University of Manchester.

**Anya Paintsil (AP)** – Welsh-Ghanaian textile artist based in Manchester. Represented by Ed Cross Fine Art.

## **A WALK IN THE PARK**

### **EPISODE 5**

*<Music plays in background: >*

**FH:** Hello and welcome to another episode of A Walk in the Park Podcast from the Whitworth Art Gallery. I'm **Francine Hayfron**, Cultural Park Keeper.

Today we're extremely pleased to catch up with the artist Anya Paintsil based in Manchester, Anya is a Welsh and Ghanaian artist who primarily works with textiles. Her work is playful yet profound and so we wanted to find out more about her and her work.

Welcome Anya we're so happy you can join us today.

**AP:** Thank you very much. Thanks for having me on.

*<Music in background: >*

**FH:** So we're going to get straight into it and take it back to growing up and your childhood.

**AP:** I grew up in Wrexham, in North Wales. It's kind of, very working class, ex industrial mining town, but most of my family are from Anglesey, which is the

island off North Wales so I'm a Welsh speaker. On the other hand, my Dad is from Ghana, that's kind of it

<Laughter>

It was an interesting dynamic to grow up with I guess, people are always really intrigued by the fact that I'm a Welsh speaker and that I am Welsh when I don't look very Welsh, particularly where I grew up. It's much less of a thing since moving away from Wales, when I tell people I'm from Wales people are generally like 'oh right...', they make a thing about the accent, but that's because I sound really Mancunian.

<Laughter>

Growing up locally, when people saw me and saw that I was a Welsh speaker, people often congratulated me on learning Welsh when it's the language I grew up with and also kind of didn't believe that I could possibly be from Wales.

**FH:** So I take it the place you lived was not very diverse, when growing up?

**AP:** Not at all. It is more diverse now. When I was growing up there was literally five other people of colour and I didn't really know any of them. There was one other person of colour in our school. So when I first met my best friend, I think I was about 15, doing a class at a local college. On our first day, about an hour after we'd met each other we went into the canteen and the dinner lady was like, 'double trouble'. I was like, 'what', and she was like 'twins' but we'd met half an hour before and she was a good foot taller than me and doesn't look anything like me at all. She's abnormally tall, I'm pretty short. We're definitely not twins, but then you always kind of had an awareness of all the other people of colour around, because everyone would always think you were them. For example, at school there was a South Asian girl who'd left the high school, about four years before me, I think her name's Annum and everyone just called me Annum.

**FH:** Just because you were vaguely the same skin tone?

**AP:** Yeah and then one of the librarians would be like 'Annum? Annum?' and if you didn't turn around people would be like 'how dare you'. Another time somebody in my class was like, 'I saw you and your Mum on the weekend'. I was like, well I hadn't been anywhere that weekend. You know my Mum is white so...', and they were like 'what, how could your mum be white'.

This was another thing that people believed that my sister and I must be adopted because there was no concept of being mixed race. I remember a girl at my school who was actually adopted telling me that I was adopted and me being extremely upset and coming home from school and being like 'Mum why haven't you told me I was adopted'.

There was just no concept of being mixed race or people would be constantly telling me my skin was too dark to be mixed race, when in reality I'm a very light skinned black person.

**FH:** Is it true that the story of when you were at school, I think it might have been primary school, were you were asked to draw a self portrait? Can you tell us a little bit about that incident?

**AP:** Well, the whole class was drawing self portraits and when I wanted to colour in my skin brown and not finding the right kind of brown, the teacher forced me to colour in my face jet black, which I was really really unhappy about. I don't remember it well at all but my Mum was obviously enraged, and then at her own expense brought the school a load of skin coloured paints in diverse shades. My mum has always been on it when it comes to any sort of discrimination or racism. She's always been really protective of us and taught us how to deal with it properly, from a young age which is unfortunately something that I'm lucky to have because I know a lot of other mixed race people don't grow up with parents that take racial abuse so seriously.

My mum actually took us out of that school, because of a lot of racist incidents, like, they sent us home with books with gollywogs in them. This would probably have been 1998-1999 so it wasn't a long time ago. Also the white children in the school are learning from those books, I've been called a 'wog' before. So the racial abuse that we encountered as children I find it really difficult to relate to

other people of colour who are from London or Manchester who all grew up in the cities where things are much different, because it was literally twenty years behind, and still is but there's not really a reason why, it's just extremely racist and proudly so I think.

**FH:** So I was going to say, we'll come on to talk a little bit more about race and identity in a bit. Just thinking back to earlier at school, or this may have been a bit later, when did you realise that you wanted to become an artist?

**AP:** I don't think I ever properly realised it. From being a really little kid I would just always draw constantly, everyday I would come home from school and draw for hours then I'd end up having quite a distinct style at a young age that is still visible in my work today. I didn't enjoy art at school at all, I proper proper hated it and I didn't do it for GCSE or A-Level. But I was living in Glasgow, I moved to Glasgow when I was 18 and when I was 23, I was kind of like, I hate my life, I'm bored I'm just going to go to art school.

Still when I was in art school, I was kind of like, this was something, an opportunity for me to pursue something I liked doing for a few years, then I would go back and get another rubbish job. I didn't see a way of me making money from making art. So I guess I discovered I wanted to do this when I realised I could make money from it, if you know what I mean. I would have done it in my spare time anyway because I think a lot of my creative drive comes from compulsion, which sounds a bit...

*<Shudders and laughs>*

It's just something that I just do and something I've always done. It was never really a goal, it was something I would do. Yeah, I don't know. When I realised I can get paid for it, and people liked my work then I thought I would give it a go, do you know what I mean?

**FH:** Well for what better reasons!

*<Laughter>*

Ok so, before we go on we asked you to pick a favourite music track from your childhood and so tell us what you chose and why?

**AP:** I chose 'Say It Loud' by James Brown because one of my favourite memories, and something I was thinking about a lot recently, is my Mum always used to play it, and we'd bounce on the bed and she'd... my Mum was white as well, she'd be like 'Say it loud' and my sister would be like 'I'm black and I'm proud!'.

*<Laughter>*

We were really really small, so we were just jumping up and down. I was talking about it with a friend a couple of weeks ago saying how lucky I am to have a Mum, a white parent, who instilled such a sense of pride in me being black and taught me about black history, made sure I always had representation in books and in my dolls in everything around me. I think a lot of other mixed race people I know unfortunately, who grew up in similar circumstances to me had a lot of self hate, which I found completely baffling, because my Mum has always made sure that me and my sister thought that we were the best people ever. And anybody who was racist or abusive to us, was just a moron.

**FH:** Ok, let's listen to the track that you chose, by James Brown, 'Say It Loud, (I'm Black and I'm Proud)'

*<Music Track: James Brown 'Say It Loud, (I'm Black and I'm Proud)'\>*

**FH:** That was James Brown with 'Say It Loud (I'm black and I'm proud)'. We were talking before, about as a child and of those experiences you'd had, of you and your sister with racism. So it seems like themes of identity and race, are they things that are important to you and come through in your work?

**AP:** I'm not sure if it was completely intentional, as if I want to speak about identity but so much of my work is about personal narratives and like, my own life. It is largely autobiographical. So these themes which have been so prominent throughout my entire life come out in my work. I have set out now to examine more of mixed race and black identity. In rural areas and outside cities, which is particularly clear in one of my pieces, 'Ni yn unig'. Where it was a

portrait of myself and my sister surrounded by complete whiteness, and are exaggerations of our natural features and I'm currently working on a new piece which really focuses on being confused with every other person of colour in a 50 mile radius.

I think it is a really important part of my work, but it's more the perspective I make my work from, and what informs my work as opposed to that. But then as well more recently I've become more interested in representations of being mixed race and physical representations in art. So I've been thinking more about depicting my Mum and my Dad in my artwork, as well as myself and other women of colour. Because my practice is almost entirely focused on black female body and the mixed race female body and mixed race portraiture and black female portraiture but now wanting to explore the reality of being mixed race. It's something that I've only kind of now become interested in since moving to Manchester. Particularly after reading, 'Don't Touch My Hair' by Emma Dabiri who I related to so much being that she's Irish and mixed race and I'm Welsh and mixed race. There's a particular passage where she talks about how, after she'd moved to London she was no longer straightforwardly a black girl, she was now mixed race.

Obviously I grew up with the realities of being mixed race and having a white parent, but I'd always been black, if you know what I mean?

**FH:** Yes

**AP:** I'd always been self identifying as black, and always others had referred to me as black. And to move to Manchester, which obviously has a big black community, and mixing and associating with more black people, I became mixed race and people would refer to me as mixed race. At first I really didn't like it, and I don't know. I found it quite difficult. Obviously people referring to me as mixed race was obviously reality and not people attempting to make me feel as if I'm not part of the black community. But it made me feel as if I was, if you know what I mean? To be around people who I'd always seen as my community and being referred to as different from that community was really really difficult. So it's just been like, am I? Am I black? Apart from my family in Ghana who

have always generally referred to me as white, which I've found really really annoying.

<Laughter>

I remember once getting my hair done in a hair salon in Ghana and Kim Kardashian came on the TV and the hair stylist was like, 'You look like her', I was like 'are you mad?'. It's the exact same thing as when white people are just like, 'oh you look like Whoopi Goldberg or you look like Beyonce' or any other black person that doesn't look like you. Suddenly a black person was telling me I looked like Kim Kardashian.

<Laughter>

But then I feel like personal angst about being mixed race is not really an important part of racial discourse, it's not really something meaningful or that has real world consequences in terms of oppression at all. But it's just something I want to explore and it's something personal and less political I suppose.

**FH:** It sounds really exciting, can't wait to see what comes out of that. And looking at a lot of the materials that you use within your work and obviously the textiles, is that a reference to your heritage, maybe Welsh heritage and traditional techniques?

**AP:** I suppose not specifically Welsh, but I'm very interested in the history of working class women in textile. Particularly textiles that have associations with utility and industrial textiles as opposed to embroidery or high textile art which is traditionally associated with upper class Victorian women. Obviously there are a lot of great contemporary embroidery work and there is a lot of interesting things being done with embroidery and it's being elevated in so many ways within the contemporary art world, but I really wanted to focus on textiles made out of necessity and out of industrial, that have such a strong working class lineage as opposed to something which has historically been associated with the wealthy.



The techniques I use, I was taught by women in my family to do rag rugging, latch hook, and then I started using punch needling. Yeah, it's technique, most of my Welsh family up until, well I wouldn't say my generation are farmers. So proper farmers with farms.

<Laughter>

**FH:** Proper farmers with farms?

**AP:** Proper farmers with farms! So my Grandma, my Great Grandad have always been of that kind of traditional where they make everything themselves, you're completely self sufficient. And that's something I've strived towards, not so much being very good at it, but I've always wanted to be somebody that can make everything and do everything myself and not have to rely on other people or also buy stuff because I'm pretty cheap.

<Laughter>

I will find a way to make it cheaply or use old materials, recycle and repurpose things which is something that's also been a really big thing in my family, just because not having a lot of money growing up we just reuse everything.

So I suppose wanting to pay homage to that lineage, but also wanting to use skills that society largely deems as useless, in my artwork. And stuff that I learnt outside arts education, to kind of draw attention to these things that are one hundred percent creative pursuits but are being viewed as necessity, domestic or associated with poor women and not of interest to the wider art world.

**FH:** Ok so you studied at MMU, Manchester Metropolitan University and you graduated this year so you were part of the people obviously affected by not being able to graduate as one would normally. What was that like actually with lockdown? Finishing the way that it did.

**AP:** To be honest I wasn't that bothered, obviously there's a pandemic on, which is way more important. When this whole thing started I was like, 'the Uni is going to shut hundred percent'. It was when everyone was hoarding toilet roll so

I came into Uni and just grabbed everything I could carry, got an Uber home and did a couple of trips and cleared out my studio before the Uni shut and then a few people on my course were like 'What are you doing? Are you hoarding your own work?', I was like 'Uni's going to shut, I am sure of it'.

<Laughter>

I saw what was happening in Italy and everywhere going into lockdown. And I thought I'd need to find a way to keep working and have all of my materials at home as soon as possible. And I tend to work from home anyways as much as possible because I keep weird hours. It's not nice not being able to go outside and use a studio for what I'd usually use it for but it's not really impacted my practice that much and also, my Grandma died of covid at the beginning of the pandemic.

**FH:** I'm so sorry

**AP:** No worries, but it was really really difficult for us. So I got an extension for my Uni work anyway, so I only handed it in and graduated officially three weeks ago. So it wasn't my focus. My grandma was a massive part in bringing me up and a massive part in of why I wasn't that bothered about the Uni shutting. Do you know what I mean?

**FH:** Oh absolutely, more important things. And so you said you had all your stuff, so have you been working I guess and producing work during lockdown? How have you found that with your creativity?

**AP:** Fine.

<Laughter>

I know it sounds stupid, but it's not really affected me at all. Apart from having to wait for ages for materials to come in the post. Apart from that, I don't know, I'm kind of a home body anyways and I like being left alone. I find working in a studio quite distracting a lot of the time, because I'm quite sensitive to the noise, which is not to saying other people are noisy. I just find it stressful, and I'm quite anxious and I don't really like being around a lot of people so don't like

going into the studio unless there's one other person in there or no-one in there, it's fine for me. Obviously I'm not happy there's a pandemic. It was sad not having a degree show, of course that is one of the things that I was really disappointed with but we have got a pandemic on and I'm not risking getting covid. It's just one of those things.

*<Laughter>*

**FH:** So we asked you to pick another track that inspires you or gets you in the mood to create. So what did you pick?

**AP:** I picked 'Jackson' by Johnny Cash and June Carter.

**FH:** *<Gasps>* Tell us why, what is it about this song that inspires you.

**AP:** It's not particularly this song, I like music and art and anything in general that doesn't take itself too seriously. I like story telling in all forms of creative stuff, but nothing that's too hard going.

**FH:** Well this tune is definitely that, so let's hear it next 'Jackson' by Johnny Cash and June Carter.

*<Music Track: 'Jackson' by Johnny Cash and June Carter>*

**FH:** That was 'Jackson' by Johnny Cash and June Carter.

Ok so the Whitworth are hoping to acquire two of your works 'Ni yn unig', which we talked about before and another piece, 'Your Mum eats like a camel'. I was going to say first of all can you describe those pieces, but I was going to say that they seem to look at the themes of identity and race. So if you could tell us a little bit more specifically about these two pieces?

**AP:** Yeah so, 'Ni yn unig' is actually inspired by a photo of me and my sister who's closest to me in age when she was probably about four and I was probably about six. And I thought the photo depicted our personalities really well, because I have my mouth wide open. And she was always kind of, she still is, she's a little more feisty now, but she's always been very very quiet and

always stuck close to me. I just wanted to kind of, interrogate our experiences growing up in Wales, it's just informed by all the stuff I've just spoken about in this conversation about being completely surrounded by whiteness. Being looked at as, essentially, aliens and being really abnormal and also the distortions people would make of us, in their own heads and reflect them onto us.

So for example, the teacher forcing me to paint my face jet black in a self portrait. People joked our lips and our noses when they're not particularly different because obviously we're mixed race, we have more European features. But people would commonly make comments on our lips and our noses, so I wanted to kind of interrogate that in a piece and distort our features and focus on the ways that we are different from those around us apart from our skin colour.

So that was kind of the thinking behind 'Ni yn unig', so it's two faces, me and my sister facing away from each other with exaggerated mouths and eyes and teeth and features. I also use my own hair in 'Ni yn unig'. I've worked with human hair before and I have worked with a lot of hair that had previously been on my head but isn't all mine in honesty, but I cut all my hair off to make that piece. I also wanted some of my sisters hair to make it, but she refused to give me any.

**FH:** I was going to say you were very brave cutting your own hair.

*<Laughter>*

**AP:** I didn't look good, when I cut it all off, but I thought I would have a change and it looked awful, it didn't suit me. I looked like a small boy, but I cut it all off for the work, because I felt that it was so personal. I had depicted myself before but this piece felt much more a piece of me. So I wanted to actually have a physical bit of me and my sister. I probably should have lied and said it was her hair, but she refused to give me any of it.

*<Laughter>*

But now since I have a career, she's like 'you can have it now', it's like 'it's too late now, I don't just want your random hair now'.

<Laughter>

Then 'Your Mum eats like a camel' is actually not so much about identity as one may assume by looking at it. I like the fact that it can be interpreted as a white person grabbing a black person's head but it's actually about my own experiences with domestic violence and the title comes from an experience I had.

But yeah I think that's the thing as well a lot of my work is so personal and comes out of personal narratives and I also made a lot of my work with the belief that nobody is going to be interested and it's just mine. And I can make it to help myself understand things and understand the world and reinterpret my own experiences or understand my own experiences. Prior to lockdown I was in therapy for post traumatic stress syndrome and it brought up a lot of stuff. And my work has been a really helpful vehicle to allow me to kind of express and process things. I wouldn't say it's cathartic, I don't know, I think it's just helped in a lot of ways.

**FH:** Well I hope that when you, as you. I'm not going to say 'when' because you will. As you become more known, you'll still feel like you can make work. Do you know what I mean? You know how you said about you not making it at the beginning for anyone to see it's just for you. And I don't know whether, as some artists become more successful that changes. But I would hope that because your work is so powerful I didn't know any of this background before and really but just looking at it straight away is so powerful anyways and you start thinking about loads of narratives. I really hope that you become more well known, you'll still create such personal works.

**AP:** Yeah I think I will to be honest, I don't know what I can create work about. Well everyone makes work about everything in the world, but I think my self obsession is what obviously fuels me.

<Laughter>

For a long time, I have made work about personal things.

*<Music plays in the background: >*

**FH:** Anya it was really really interesting and great fun to speak to you today. I can't wait, I hope, fingers crossed, we acquire your works and just wishing you all the best for your future. I'm sure you've got a great career ahead of you.

You know where you heard it first and keep watching this space to find out more about Anya Paintsil.

**AP:** Thanks very much!

### **A WALK IN THE PARK - EPISODE 5**

This has been a Folded Wing production, for the Whitworth gallery in Manchester.

*<End>*

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