

# the Whitworth

## Podcast transcript

May 2024

### A WALK IN THE PARK

*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 6

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### A WALK IN THE PARK

## EPISODE 6 - SPEAKERS

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

**Olivia Heron (OH)** - Curator, Whitworth Art Gallery

**Alnoor Mitha (AM)** - Curator, Academic, Artist

**John Lyons (JL)** - Artist and Poet

## A WALK IN THE PARK

### EPISODE 6

**FH:** You are now listening to A Walk in the Park, a podcast brought to you by The Whitworth Art Gallery.

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Hello and welcome to A Walk in the Park a podcast that takes a closer look at some of the exhibitions and work taking place inside the Whitworth Art Gallery in Manchester.

My name is **Francine Hayfron**, your host, and Cultural Park Keeper at the Whitworth. And in this episode, we take a look at the exhibition 'Carnavalesque' by the poet and artist John Lyons.

In May 2024, the Whitworth will present the first major retrospective of the work of the artist and poet John Lyons.

The exhibition will survey six decades of his contribution to British Art, Literature and art education, centered on his exploration of Caribbean folklore and mythology through painting and poetry.

To find out more about the forthcoming show, I caught up with Olivia Heron, curator at the Whitworth.

**OH:** Hi, my name is Olivia Heron and I'm curator at the Whitworth and I've curated John Lyons 'Carnavalesque'.

**FH:** Another artist and friend of John Lyons who has contributed to the process of making this exhibition is Alnoor Mitha. Olivia Explains.

**OH:** Alnoor Mitha is an artist, a painter, lecturer, and a curator. And he curated the exhibition 'Behind the Carnival' in 1992 when he worked at Huddersfield Art

Gallery. Which was a sort of maybe like a mini retrospective of John's work at the time.

And John and Alnoor met in Manchester during the 1980s. They set up a shared studio together, a shared painting studio along with Lin Tang who is a poet and painter, and John and Alnoor have been very close friends over the decades. And Alnoor has really sort of advocated for John's work and sort of believed in him all of this time. So, they've got a really nice personal friendship.

**AM:** My name is Alnoor Mitha, and I am a senior research fellow at Manchester Metropolitan University. I teach BA, MA and PhD students, and it's great to be here at the Whitworth Art Gallery, one of my favourite galleries in Greater Manchester.

**FH:** I asked Alnoor about when he first met John.

**AM:** I actually met John for the very first time at the Green Room. I was doing a performance that I had designed. I designed these kinds of installations, for a performance called Rangran and somebody told John, oh, you must meet Alnoor because he is an artist as well.

So, we connected then, and then we met later on. So, I was I'd recently married, and John very kindly invited me for a *lovely* dinner at his place. And of course, you know that John is an amazing cook, not least having published a Trini cookery book. So, I was delighted to have gone to John's place and had dinner there. And that's how we met. And then we *really* got on well. So, we decided to jointly get a studio together called Zamana Studio, which was based in Salford Quays. And then we began to kind of, you know get to know each other even better as we were, you know, practicing together in the studio.

**FH:** Chatting with Olivia, I asked her why she wanted to make the show.

**OH:** Well it started, it all started out, Alnoor and I were working together on another project and we just sort of hit it off, really and we were chatting and Alnoor said, you know, I know this artist, John Lyons, and I think you should be interested in him. And he starts to explain John's work. And I remembered his work from 'Life between Islands' at Tate, these beautiful paintings with the poetry alongside. And I was intrigued because I didn't know that he was from, well, that he had spent so long in Manchester, so many decades here.

And so that really piqued my interest. You know I recognised John's work, but only from those few paintings that I had seen at Tate.

And I, you know Alnoor introduced me to him, and I started to get more interested, look at his full sort of back catalogue in a way. And was completely blown away by sort of his activities and impact in Manchester. So, he was a secondary school art teacher, a college lecturer, he reviewed, he appeared in lots of exhibitions around town. He reviewed exhibitions of other artists' work.

He even was involved in community theatre, making sets, doing hundreds of workshops with school children. And also, I found this. I found this out a bit later down the line, but he gave a talk at the Whitworth Art Gallery in 1990 and a

lecture at University of Manchester in 1988. So, he just had this amazing kind of legacy in the city. And so many people, you know, of his age, sort of knew him, were touched by his work. But he wasn't really, he hadn't really been inscribed, a legacy hadn't really been inscribed for him. You know, his works were hard to find in public collections, certainly not in Manchester. Although two works, we've got in the show are coming from Rochdale and Huddersfield, and there's barely been anything written about him either. So that was why, you know, one of the reasons we were wanting to create a catalogue for the exhibition as well. But yeah, so I just thought you know, this guy's had such a presence and sort of energetic sort of artistic life across all, you know, many different art forms in Manchester. And he hasn't you know he hasn't really been put forward and celebrated in the way that he should be.

So, I thought yes, it definitely is a time for a major retrospective here and just open up his work to a whole new generation of people.

**FH:** I was fortunate enough to catch up with the man himself, John Lyons, at his home, and asked him about his childhood memories growing up as a young boy in Trinidad and Tobago in the 1930s and 1940s.

**JL:** Well, it was very very adventurous. I have to say though, as a little boy I was very, very talkative, and curious, especially when grown-ups were around. I was always asking questions, and so on.

And there was one particular guy who knew my father very well, whenever I came to do.. oh here we go and he used to sort of turn me around and pretend he was screwing me up at the back you know as you do with toys.

He'd say ok, go on ask a question and that sort of thing. But I was very curious person but also very sensitive really because I obviously had my mother then. oh, I remember her yes, ...yes, you know I remember her very well.

But it was a bit of a loss when she went, but she took me everywhere she went, you know I was a little bit spoilt really as a first child you know. And so, I remember her when she was actually putting perfume on herself when she was going out, she would sort of hold me and put some on me she would spoil me really when I was a little boy. And I was very fond of her and remember her smile. Perfect teeth. And I've never seen anyone with such perfect teeth, and when she smiled her eyes sort of got smaller when she smiled. And that is how I remember her, you know. And so, I had a very loving childhood, so you can imagine when she went at the age of nine what it was like.

And you know, so I remember as well, Carnival oh my gosh, it was scary! I remember it in the older days, I remember it as a phantasmagoria, really. And it was truly that. Because you had individual masquerades coming around and they always have, you know the devil for instance and he would have a little imp with him beating a drum, bam de bam de bam de bam dam bam.

And he would come up to you with all his, almost be semi naked and his body painted in red or blue, and he is wearing this mask and coming dancing up to you. And you always try to figure out why. I'd seen him with adults, but me I was hiding behind my mum's skirt, you know it was scary, but at the same time,

I was very excited you know and maybe that's where the painting 'Mama Look A Mas Passin' comes from. Because you know it would go quiet for a while, I mean the bands in Trinidad it's not like here, it's guided. In Trinidad, the whole city was open to you basically. So, bands, they plotted their route before, and they went where they wanted to go.

So, there were points where there was nothing happening in the streets where we were, but what happened in terms of a band coming. But it was always exciting cos you can hear the music, you can hear them coming, you know. Because there was a lull, in the you know. But of course, you have to imagine this in the street itself. A lot of people were selling things like roti and sugar cake and things all along because that was a good time for them to do business right. So that was fun too because you know we had a lot of delicate things to eat that you don't normally get every day.

And so, in that lull that would be happening. And you would have the individual masquerades who used to come, you know, like the Devil. And the Midnight Robber. Who made a speech about what he was like you know, my name is 'Rasta Rumber' And talk about vaulting himself up you know.

So you had that, and you had the Jab Jab , the Jab Jab coming along with the whips and you know so all that was happening it was like a drama really, it's like an open theatre you know and then all of a sudden you can hear the music in the distance. And you can see people begin to move like this, and dancing.

And they come together and sometimes they turn away. but sometimes they really come together and sometimes it's not quite right because rivals you know they have a little bit of something happening between them. So, it was exciting, it was like an open drama, and it was freedom, because it's said that in fact. if you're naughty on Carnival Day, the person who's dancing beside you, you don't know who that person is, winding his body and doing all that sort of stuff. And if your naughty and you go to court in about a weeks' time, that person might be your judge or somebody, so it's like a leveller, Carnival in Trinidad was a wonderful wonderful social leveller.

Except for the colonials the ones that didn't want to join in, it was a special Carnival, you know trucks used to go round with barriers, and it was all decorated. They all really wore only domino masks not fully costumed, and they'd be singing but that was different. They didn't have in my day we didn't have any steel bands and shaking things, music was that simple you know. Look at steel band music where you could hear the beat, bum de bum dem bum de bum dum you know that sort of thing. And of course, you know I remember it's in my body you know, I even when I go dancing here, and I can even be in the kitchen, I'm cooking and some calypsos come on. I don't have to think about it my whole-body start moving.

**FH:** I asked Olivia the Curator what we can expect from the exhibition.

**OH:** So, when the visitor arrives in the exhibition, they'll first go into you know there's a small space that explains who John is, a bit about his, you know the overview of the exhibition and the first work that visitors will encounter is called

The Counsellor. And John painted this between 1996 and 1998 and it's a self-portrait of him. And on his shoulder, there's a beautiful statuesque barn owl, or the Jumbie bird as it's known in Trinidad. And this painting really sums up his philosophy.

I think. he, The Counsellor, the Jumbie bird is his kind of spirit guide in a way. So he's described this work to me, talking about how the owl is kind of sitting on his shoulder, whispering in his ear, whispering guidance in his ear, and there's a beautiful poem that will be presented in that first room called 'Guru Bird' which sort of sums up what the owl or Jumbie bird represents to John. So, it's his sort of creative and spiritual guide in a way, it can move between worlds. It's a liminal creature so in a way it's kind of through the Jumbie bird, John kind of dives into his imagination, his creative spirit, his psyche, and going into different worlds really.

**JL:** Through my contact with nature and at the time when I was sad and upset emotionally because my mother just died. I was still in Trinidad and Tobago; It's how to put it. Nowadays you think of it as intuition.

But we, I lived a life that actually I felt as though I was being spoken to somehow. And I thought it might be the bird, that owl, because I learnt about the owl in the tales. They talked about it being a liminal character. it lives in both worlds. You can you can happily, it can be wise, but it could be, there's a darkness as well. But that is what life is all about anyway. As I grew older, I began to see life like that. Actually, and I began to theorise on it. So why the reason, why things are why there is always dark. There's light because you wouldn't have dark if there was light. If it wasn't light. Because one is opposite to the next you see. So, all those thought's But I had those. But they were coming to me actually even then in a very strange sort of way.

So, what has led me what has fed me is that, Counsellor. That's a bird that new more than I did. It's a wise owl, but it can go into both worlds light and then dark. And then maybe it's sort of a visual thing, of of an intuition thing, you know being fed. So, because I don't. I don't maybe this is where I am. Everything revolves around my understanding; everything revolves around working intuitively.

**OH:** The exhibition's organised into three parts, three main strands in John's Practice. So rather than being chronological, it sort of follows different threads over the decades. So, the main room is called 'Carnavalesque'. And that looks at John's and sort of exploration of Carnival through his career. And so, the works in that room date from 1986 – 2023.

So, it just shows how long he's been engaging with that theme. And we meet different characters from Carnival. So, the Jab Jab, we meet Bookman for example. We see the crowd of Carnival. We get a sense of the different stages of the Carnival as it unfolds, the different days.

So, Ash Wednesday, jövet, and this room kind of is supposed to be. His painting sort of conjures up the atmosphere of Carnival in his energetic

brushstrokes, the beautiful colours, the sort of enigmatic characters. And I'll talk a bit about maybe some of the key works in that room.

So, the biggest, the biggest work in the show, and this is actually John's largest surviving work is called 'Before Ash Wednesday' and 'Trinidad', painted in 1988. and it's an amazing piece. It absolutely sort of magnetises as you encounter it.

And here we see a devil band. There's a number of different characters and above them's a kind of Jumbie bird that I mentioned before it is transforming into a human face. That's kind of caught in sort of, kind of swirling vortex, in a sense. And if you look closely, you can just about see the main figure at the front is in Bookman Masquerade character.

And you can just about see his face, his real face underneath the mask. So, I like that the more, the longer you spend looking at his works, the more you see and you start to be surprised. You find clues that that John has left, and even in how he puts his brushstrokes together, things start to emerge from that.

So, faces, figures, or maybe a fish or an eye. You never know what you are going to see, really. And that is something that John talks about a lot, his intuitive process of painting. He kind of sees, where sees where the paint brush takes him, really. And taps into his childhood memories, his foundational memories of Trinidad Carnival. Another work is called 'Mama Look A Mass Passin', and that one shows sort of three devilish characters together and sort of almost being engulfed by these colourful flames, and the middle one seems to be drawing you in, enticing you to you know dance, and join the parade with him.

And so, this one, John talks about his foundational experience of Carnival and encountering it as a really young child, hiding behind his mother's legs. And you just imagine that, that kind of atmosphere, the sounds, the noise, the colour, you know the excitement of it all, but also the fear, these devilish characters. So, he he kind of describes hiding because he's not sort of drawn in but he's also a bit scared and he wants to hang back. And so, I suppose that painting, which was done in 1990, shows just how powerful those early influences were for him there still reverberating for him, you know decades later, even after being in the UK for 60 years, they're still really important to him. They've shaped his psyche and his sense of self and that's a really big part of this work as well. It's about going into his own mind, I suppose and understanding his psyche, what shaped it, where he is really coming from.

**JL:** So, Carnival was not just the music, it was a drama you saw too and had individual masquerades coming around and then it also was history, because in my day, I was born in 1933 of course and of course the Americans were in Trinidad. And so you had Marine bands, you know the whole costume, like so they were soldiers and they had Sailor bands, you know Sailors. We had bad behaviour sailors, and so on and they were dressed differently and so on and we all and it was lovely, I can see see them all in a uniform, it was lovely. And that's how I remember this Carnival. You know when I came here, and I looked at Carnival here, you know I didn't go very often. No because that's when I felt

sad because it was different. And you were actually guided where, you have to go and the policemen all round, and this type of thing.

But in Trinidad, you know even the policemen, sometimes sort of you can see them standing, you know what I mean? They sort of enjoying the music as well, and they'll be there if something went wrong obviously. But but it was it was like that and that's how I remember Carnival.

And also, the night the Carnival did not start on a Monday and Tuesday before Ash Wednesday, it started long before, and it started with the mask camps, where people used to cook and making costumes. And so, on and the whole community and Carnival Sunday we had a Carnival. Sunday was special because you had kiddies' Carnival on Sundays and the competitions steel band competitions, who's the best, who's the best road march for that day and the day I left. The time I left Trinidad it was 'Dean and Dinah,' it was around 'Clementina, around the corner posing' and was singing you know and the music was, that you know and and the bands played in their different ways and the bands themselves had their own little Road matches and so. So, it was exciting. I hope this poem tells you, give you a whole background of of what Carnival was about, and it's because it was about life in its real essence.

## **Behind the Carnival**

*In the beginning was Carnival:  
the pulse that animated the germ in the soup,  
made sperm a triumphant amphibian,  
stirred seed to shoot, burned green  
in every tree and herb. The earth  
became woman's sister  
and men hid their awe behind masks,  
shaped wood and clay into their fear  
behind the Carnival.*

*Behind the Carnival  
awe turned to dancing; the moaning  
was not wind through trees  
when lust was innocent  
behind the Carnival.*

*Behind the Carnival  
African gods came out of stones,  
gave power to the throbbing drums.  
Yokes and barracoons could not destroy  
deep harmonies of their chanting  
behind the Carnival.*

*Behind the Carnival*

*the whipping voice drove slaves  
from beds, each one a flambeaux-bearer  
coursing with a strength to survive,  
dousing cane fields burning up the night  
behind the Carnival.*

*Behind the Carnival  
was a camboulay of dancing torches;  
Jabmolasi cavorting, a different fire  
in his loins; but that freedom  
was as seed-cotton blown in hurricane  
behind the Carnival.*

*Behind the Carnival  
Ma Jake weeps in her chicken pelau,  
remembering her daughter who danced  
too long in the rain, caught pleurisy  
was buried seven days later  
behind the Carnival.*

*Behind the Carnival  
Carmen, saving to play mas,  
rakers her mind before coal-pot fire  
trying to figure out how to make ends met  
behind the Carnival.*

*Behind the Carnival  
Boysie argues with his wife,  
mother of nine hungry picknies:  
he must follow in his father's footsteps  
playing midnight robber  
even if it's the last he does behind the Carnival.*

*Behind the Carnival  
no Devil Band for Sharkie this time:  
he was practicing his wining-up too close  
to a woman jamet; he is in hospital now,  
balls kicked in  
Behind the Carnival.*

*Behind the Carnival  
jumbie owls screech.  
They see what no masquerader see:  
The portent in Bad-behaviour sailors' dance,  
'Las lap we go beat massa-massa,  
Las lap we go beat massa-massa.'  
Behind the Carnival.*

*Behind the Carnival  
the dragon menaces;  
but he is chained by steel  
tempered in the hell of sugar cane plantations  
and must learn to dance calypso.  
'Hold the dragon,  
Hold the dragon,'  
Behind the Carnival.*

**FH:** that was the poem 'Behind the Carnival' read by John Lyons

Behind the colourfulness and the vibrancy of the masquerade, the poem reflects the flip side of real life. I asked John if that was his intention.

**JL:** That's what it's about, actually because it was. People lived for Carnival, but at the same time they had to live their lives waiting for Carnival, and it was hard. But it's like a cathartic sort of experience they had. It soothes them. It's it gave them you know, it was important. It was not just entertainment, to have a pretty costume, just jump up and that's it. It was real because there are people who lived for it, the people like you know in the poem. Yeah, people who actually had to scrape money to your own. In fact, they had hardship, but they still wanted to be part of celebration because it gave them, a meaning to live it that's how important it was as far as I can know it. I didn't see it.

**FH:** Back to the exhibition.

**OH:** So, the next room in the exhibition is called 'The Language of Painting'. And this room looks at the development of John's practice as a painter. So, it's this part of the exhibition has his earliest surviving works.

So, it starts out looking at the impact of his time at Goldsmiths College in London. So, John was born in Trinidad in 1933, and he came to the UK in 1959 when he was 25, to study art at Goldsmiths. So, the art and he's described this as a transformational experience for him in terms of how he saw art and its possibilities.

So, the earliest work is a drawing from 1964, and it was created during his time in Teacher Training in Newcastle. And it sort of illustrates some of the principals he took on board at Goldsmiths, basically thinking about how you can analyse forms around you and sort of in order to see the world differently and present your own vision of what our world is.

In the 1980s he really starts to, he comes into his own, really, in terms of, so he's by this point, he's got his signature colour palette and his expressive painterly style. But in the 80s he starts to get more specific and come into his own really in terms of, so he's by this point, he has got his signature colour palette and his expressive painterly style.

But in the 80s he starts to get more specific with his symbolism, and he turns to the folklore and mythology of Trinidad and Tobago and Carnival and starts to

look to his own sort of unique fingerprint in a way and apply that to his art practice.

So, one of the most striking works in there is called self-portrait with Jumbo Bird and Alter Ego. That's done in 1990 we have borrowed it from Huddersfield Art Gallery, so this is an amazing portrait because it's a self-portrait of John. And you can see just about landing on his head is this amazing majestic owl. So his sort of spirit guide, the jumbie bird in the background, his alter ego, the jab jab is balancing on a tightrope, John is also balancing a paintbrush on his fingertip and you can see he's sort of standing on one leg and sort of holding the viewers gaze.

And this sums up his artistic philosophy really. So, this idea of risk as a painter you go into it, and you just don't. You don't. it's a bit of a risky business. Sometimes you don't necessarily know where you're going. But you've got to trust in the process.

In around 1998, John moved to Hebden Bridge and with his partner Jean Rhys and they set up 'Hourglass Studio Gallery' together, and that it was to be a painting studio for John but also a community arts venue. So, imagine this, John's in there, all this painting stuffs around him. He's he's working but also invited her in. There are young children doing Saturday art classes. There's evening poetry readings, there's watercolour classes for adults. There's creative writing classes for adults. So, they also organised exhibitions there, of other artists. So local artists and you know, some quite prominent artists as well. They had an exhibition of work by Bill Ming, whose another Caribbean artist and it was a real community hub and had the real impact on people of people who came there. And so, so in some of the paintings from this time, you kind of get the sense of John in his studio painting but also being surrounded by the people who were kind of looking at and engaging with his work. And John talks about this in you know in his interview, but this shows his principle of creative continuum.

So, for him, it's not about you know, he doesn't fix the meaning of the work. Once he creates the work and puts it out there its he wants it to be up to to interpretation and what really sort of interests him and, you know, pleases him is when other people respond to his work and take something from it and build on it. And you know in the same way that he's he's part, he sees himself as part of a long lineage of artists who, you know kind of seeing the world in new ways and developing it from one another.

**FH:** I asked John where the idea of creative continuum came from.

**JL:** I was thinking about that because I think when I went to Tate Britain exhibition, and I worked with the Tate, because people, somebody came in and they said we knew that was your work I didn't have to ask. And they liked it. And I thought Ok that's interesting. Perhaps I have got something that someone can recognise that I have, and other people said the same thing.

And the head of the Tate Britain you know the one Alex Faraquharson, he interviewed me, and he said things to me that made me, In fact I thought it was flattery in a way.

And me, and I thought oh, you know well, and I met him again and he said you see were we have put you, and it was just in the other room as you came in the first room you had Ronald Moody and you had them Aubrey Williams and they died. And they were real iconic figures in the arts, the visual arts from the Caribbean part of the world. And he said that. And then you came to that first room after you start where their work is, you can see my work as you open the door. Right, that's the first thing you see. And he said you see I put you there because you of your you know you can of course you know, because I'm much older than most people think I am. Then he said well there you are. You're even older than the guys, than those guys opposite. And it was there that I began to think and I said well okay, I've being showing all the time, work everywhere, and I and I never had this at this level and I've always keen to show what I was doing.

And people and I say I don't care whether if people don't like it or if they did like it, but don't ignore it, basically if you ignore it, I mean I'm not upset if you are, more upset than if you stand and say oh god, I don't like that.

You know because it's interesting. I want to know why. Because they are it tells me that they are something of themselves they are putting into it. And so, it was so in contrast to how they felt and all they thought. So that stayed with me. And I thought, okay, that's what creative continuum is about. Actually, I've created it.

Once I've put on the walls it's not mine anymore, it belongs to any everybody else who engage with it. It's my act. Physically its mine. But it's not mine virtually it's not mine it's on the wall and everybody can engage with all they want to, and that's fine. That's another area of sharing. So that's how it is.

**OH:** So, the final room is called 'Finding the Self in Folklore' And it kind of starts to go a bit deeper than the Carnival and Carnival works. And looks to some of the folklore that underlies Carnival. And that really sort of shaped John's childhood as he was growing up in Trinidad and Tobago. So, there are works that also look at nature as well. And John's strong connection to nature, growing up in this beautiful landscape.

**JL:** Living in Trinidad before I, before my mother died, we had our own plot of land. Of course, my father built his own house and all that, but it wasn't like I didn't know what a forest was. I heard about it. We didn't know what a forest was, looked like. You know, your bush all around you called the bush. There was near we lived up there on the hills, you know a lot of trees and so on. But I used to go up there for Mangos, you know, going with mango trees, so on. But I went into Tobago, we had lots of land. We had two sets of land, actually one was near to where we call the hall where the Governors house was, but was not used at all, because we go 'up yonder' my grandmother with a Scottish background, you know 'up yonder' and we visited a couple of times and was wild. And I thought this was interesting. I think I saw an agouti once, you know one of those wild animals' you know there.

But were in 'Rocky Vale' although as a village you know as a proper street and everything like that. Beyond that the house we built, we had lots and lots of land

for afterwards. So that was really, apart from the mango trees and the cocoa trees and the banana trees. And all the rest of it. And the bush basically was bushy, and because at that particular time, I was an early reader, you know, I read, gosh Its about I have to say I really started and then the forest came into that, you see, because I started reading around only ten, eleven. I must say when I say kids read don't they, but I was reading novels, I was reading books, cos my aunt was being a teacher, she went off to teach in the country and my cousin Yvonne and I who is half Indian background, she, we borrowed Aunt Christine's book, library card and we read books like Walter Scott , and Conan Doyle, I read those books at the early age, you know, and then we read all kids' books as well ... Roger you know and Swiss family Robinson. You know, the adventurous ones, and when we read those, I experienced it from their view point, well because we had a river, we call it a river, but it was a few meters wide in parts and a bit wider in parts, but it went through our land you see and in certain parts of it, when it turned a corner, right on where we were, it was deep enough for fish and crayfish to be there. So, I used to go fishing, you know what I mean? So, I had that experience. There were snakes I seen snakes and so on. You know, and I actually I had that experience. I was in the bush really.

And and all those stories of Trinidad with the Jumbies and the Douens, Douens were babies, who were died before they were christened. And they were in that folklore convention painting, I had done because their feet turned backwards.

They didn't have any features at all, but a mouth, a small mouth and the hair, they had cane rows hair. So, you know it was all tha. And I thought I heard them, really as a boy, you know and I had experiences that were weird, because you, the forest is alive. It's a living thing, it comes alive. Not just the song of the animals, but it's a sense as though you're being watched. I mean, so this is what I talked about, the folklore and the legends. I was living in, I was in another world, it wasn't just something I read in books, it was something that came alive for me.

**OH:** The final part of 'Finding the Self in Folklore' that really looks at John's intuitive way of painting. So, there's different works that sort of illustrate how when he's painting, he's just he's in the moment, he's thinking about painting, he's not planning his works. He maybe has some ideas that he thinks he wants to explore. But at the end of the day, he doesn't know how it is going to turn out.

So, one beautiful example is called 'Obeahwoman Scrapbook of Spells' which is from 2005. And it's a beautiful work. It's sort of warm shades of pink and brown with just hints of blue, kind of beautiful turquoise blue just shimmering out from around the edges.

And as you look at it, you see more and more. So, you can see a face in the middle, but then you start to see more and more faces emerging from these swirling colours, swirling sort of shades and tones of colours.

And you can see figures. You start, you know, there ones part on the left where you think, you see an owl's face, you see the kind of heart shaped owls face, but then it turns into two people just facing each other very closely. So, and this

Obeahwoman is a kind of a witch or a healer figure. And so yeah, I love the idea of kind of gathering together her spells in this beautiful, kind of enigmatic picture. And the more you spend looking at it, the more you see different shapes and ideas come out. And that is exactly what John wants people to experience when they're looking at his works. Not only is John a brilliant artist, he's also a great cook. I remarked this his love of food does not go unnoticed within his work.

**JL:** Absolutely. I enjoy eating, I enjoy food and also its very much, I've been able because of my creativity. I found that's another creative thing because when I'm in the studio and I get to the point where the painting is no longer talking to me, I haven't got that relationship with it and telling me what intuitively, I go, I go there and I go to the shed where I do my writing. And if I go there and I'm still not satisfied, I come in and I cook.

Basically, I'm the cook here. Anyway, I love cooking, I've cooked all my life, and I come in and it's the same. And sometimes, I'm not sure what I'm going to do. And that book that I saw, I put my notes in. No, I it's just another cookbook to come at some point in the future. But I write it down. I go there and I work it out sometimes and or new ideas just come to me and say Oh, that's interesting. And I get, I just sometimes a picture in the book for instance, I saw a picture of spinach in, you know, with something else, oh that's interesting. And I told, oh wait a minute, I can do something like that. You know and I don't know what they did, but I say, oh I can use Spinach, I can do something like that. And you know, I mean, and I don't, I don't know, it just comes because, you know you've got the mechanism, taste, texture, colour, taste texture colour, smell, the colour, smell balance.

But I do love cooking anyway. And yeah, it's part of life and part of, that's also a method of welcoming and hospitality and everything else.

**FH:** I also asked Olivia what the experience was like for her working on the exhibition.

**OH:** It's been incredible. It's just been an absolute joy to work with John. He's such a generous person, and he's completely overflowing with creativity.

So, we've, you know, when we've been working together, he's coming up with new ideas. He's written a couple of new poems for the show. And also, just he's he's this idea of creative continuum where he kind of passes the baton over to other people to create meaning and continue meaning in his work and bringing out works, that he hasn't seen in decades, you know maybe 20 years.

And talking about them together, he's saying oh even now I'm seeing new things in his work that I didn't see before, or I'd forgotten about.

So, I think it's been a really reciprocal process, a really fruitful process and very stimulating, very creative and enjoyable. John is a fantastic cook and he and wife Jean have invited us into their home very generously.

So Alnoor and I went for studio visits. We got fed very well and every visit there was a very special menu created by John. And yeah, it's just been a wonderful

experience. And also, what's been especially fascinating for me is looking back at his impact in Manchester really, and seeing just how much stuff he was involved in. He was completely well and still is completely unstoppable, really in terms of that creative drive, and complete commitment to his own practice but also encouraging that in other people. And so yeah, it's been a privilege to work with him and very very enjoyable.

**FH:** I asked Alnoor what he thought visitors would take away from the Exhibition.

**AM:** I think for sure they will take away the magic of Carnival, you know I think everyone us familiar with the Carnival in Manchester because of course we have the Carnival here as well. And so, when people come here, they will be mesmerized by the way John has depicted the incredible scenes from the Carnival. So, they will take that picture away. And I think it's going to be a memorable image. That will retain in their memory for me. It's there and it will be there for the rest of my life. And I think that may also be true for the viewers.

**FH:** And lastly, I wanted to know what's John's thoughts were on the term Retrospective.

**JL:** Oh yeah well, Retrospective is interesting, because Retrospective is actually a discovery for me, because I'm discovery things about myself and how I've moved and where I'm going. I'm discovering that I have moved on. And because I have moved on and I have hope there's more for me to go to. I'm moving on, all the time. And I must keep that, because life would be very dull. if I stop. if I'm walking, keep walking man, keep walking put one foot, move on and discover. There's a lot more to discover, I know nothing really! I know nothing, there's a lot more to know, I have no idea, And also because of that. I also embrace the term uncertainty, there's always uncertainty. You embrace the uncertainty, you don't know what's over there, you have to keep going, and you are free to go, if you know where you are going, well you are not free to go, in a way, you are certain about something, but you have to embrace uncertainty, when you are creating and depend on intuition.

**FH:** John Lyons Carnavalesque opens at the Whitworth on Friday 10<sup>th</sup> May. Also available from The Whitworth shop will be several of John's poetry books and prints, head to [Thewhitworthshop.com](http://Thewhitworthshop.com) to browse and purchase online. Also opening in May is 'Show Me the World Mister', a solo exhibition by Ayo Akingbade and a collection of Post War Textiles by Shirley Craven

<Music Plays in the Background: xxxxxx>

And that's it for this Episode of A Walk in the Park, until next time.

<End>

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

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