

### Transcript of interview with Deanio X

*ROS: Hello everyone, my name is Ros Croker and I'm from Royal Museums Greenwich and today I'm talking with artist Deanio X. Welcome Deanio, its lovely to be able to connect with you today.*

*So Royal Museums Greenwich have recently acquired a digital image of one of your pieces of artwork Deanio. Thank you so much for allowing us to do that. It comments on the Windrush scandal which has seen the deportation of people who have been living in the UK for decades and this piece is called From Africa to the Caribbean to Catford - A Great British scandal.*

*So before we go in to talking about the piece, for those out there listening it would be really great if you could tell us a little bit about your approach to your work in general and your practice if that's alright.*

DEANIO: I guess I used to draw a lot as child so drawing has become natural to me. But I studied history and literature, I did a course called American Studies and I guess that was away from the visual art area I am in now. But the opportunity to study history was much of the driving force central to my work now - having learnt these things I didn't get to learn at school about how I am and how I fit into the world really but also this country. Through learning about history books and [being] able to do some more deliberate studies. Now I guess I like to be able to express visually. The background hasn't always been strictly fine art but it's lending well to learning literature that can reveal something hopefully visually if that makes sense?

*ROS: Yes it does. Thank you very much it's really good to know here where you're coming from in terms of the context. Can you tell us more about the piece and what inspired you to create it?*

DEANIO: Yeah so I've done a lot of reading really intensely and wanted to do a piece of work that tied up my personal experiences ground up in the UK as a minority and what I was seeing around me and seeing in the UK around the time of the refugee crisis that seems to be affecting African people and Middle

Eastern people and formally colonised people. So I just wanted to learn and see how to figure those seemingly different things together in a visual.

In my readings I'd just got to Windrush. In my studies I was more familiar with American history and the Americas but not so much about locally. In finally reaching that part of my studies, in learning about the Windrush, I guess that's when a process was due and that is when the Windrush scandal happened. It was quite coincidental that all over the news as I reached this area of learning, that it had become everyone learning about it, so that it seemed kind of necessary that when my brother and I found a place to paint we thought yeah lets go and paint how we feel about Windrush, that is about our place in London and the UK basically.

*ROS: Thank you very much. I have an image of it in front of me. Did you want to talk about the elements you put together and the elements your brother Nathan Bowen put together and how that collaboration worked?*

DEANIO: Yeah happily. I think Nathan's way of painting is much more playful than mine is generally so I think that was nice to go and do a piece that kind of spoke to the serious element so the study and the things that I tried to learn more about and the ability to perceive a ... in an image that is faithful and un-cartoony. I think that Nathan makes those kind of images that everyone in London is now become very familiar. I don't know, the seriousness of what we're talking about mixed with the colourful elements that kind of draws the eye and our two different but related ways of working.

*ROS: So were there any responses that surprised you from particular communities or people - individuals?*

DEANIO: Not from that piece but from other pieces. There was a piece where I first started drawing the faces and I had written quite clearly 'refugees welcome' and there was a hashtag at the time. I remember someone had taken a picture of what I'd written - 'refugees welcome' - and they'd circled it using their phone and they sent their messages on Instagram saying 'no they're not'.

That's probably, that doesn't happen too often. But I guess some people are silent with their response – they could paint over you and not necessarily say way. I mean honestly more so than not responses have been positive.

*ROS: Fantastic, as it should be really*

DEANIO: Yep

*ROS: What do you think in your opinion are the biggest challenges that face the Windrush generation today?*

DEANIO: I think it's the same challenges. For me it seems like time repeating itself, where the conversation that seems to go in a direction then we also seem to find ourselves in the same situation like now there is a lot of unrest going on with police brutality and the George Floyd killing. And we're seeing people respond massively everywhere. And in seeing other people being brought to attention that's been inspiring other people. You don't know exactly where it leads, it pushes the pressure on these pieces, I think that things change but ultimately there is still a large system that organises I guess opportunities for different people in virtue of where you come from and what your cultural legacy is.

I think that things can change but you know there is a lot that needs to be addressed. The murals are a reminder that we are here and we are dedicated to be ourselves expressing ourselves regardless of what our situation is. We are here. And there are things that are happening like corona that are seeing people from Black and Asian backgrounds that are being effected disproportionately. These are the same people who attended. These are people came out on mass when these people came over in a fairly large mass on those boats and that wave of migration started and worked in those industries that are essential have been a backbone for how we understand the UK today. And it's just not spoken about.

Yesterday I had a conversation with my brother and he said he was really hurt growing up when he realised that there were Caribbean people and African people who contributed in the world wars but that was never deemed

necessary to communicate. People who have sacrificed, their ancestors who have sacrificed are still not living in the same position as those in the rest of the country. People just want recognition, acknowledgement. We've seen a lot of energy, hopefully that it's maintained and used effectively.

I liked the statue in Bristol, you must have seen, that was pulled down.

ROS: *Yep*

Things like that you know, it's a good thing. You look at that footage, and here was a lot of people there, it was just a moment that feels like now's the time, now we can do it you know what I mean. It's just a reminder that people carry the benefits. It's crazy that now of all times is the appropriate time.

*ROS: It's quite interesting, really interesting in relation to the statues and monuments, especially in relation to street murals, street art in terms of permanence versus temporary nature and what that means in terms of how we reflect and use those public spaces to talk about messages that are really key right now and ongoing. Have you got any thoughts about that in terms of the role that artists can play in creating change?*

DEANIO: Absolutely, yeah I think if predominately people protest peacefully, people are smart enough to know they are outnumbered, police are, they've got much more support so they tend to protest peacefully. The way that art in a way can contribute to that – you can put something there and leave it there. You can go to a protest and inevitably you have to go home, you have to rely on the press that will hopefully share it with the world in the right way. Whereas hopefully with the murals you leave a legacy you don't know how long it's going to last for – it could last a while, it could last a day.

During the protest on Saturday we painted in parliament square and that was a beautiful experience. I'd never imagine painting there in a normal situation because we'd get arrested straight [away]. But in this situation when people had something to say and express themselves – they show their support and their defiance. People provided other ways - images of the artwork and they combined their voice with it, that was cool, that was really nice experience. It

felt like that was how we contributed. We enabled people to also contribute in the way that they wanted to.

But you never know how long it's going to be there for. What we've been trying to do is trying to archive as we go so we have made this thing called the Stay Strong Route that puts the murals on a map and however long they are there they can be found. We're trying to do more things like that to make it more functional. We wanted to go on a journey for it. We want to think big as well – you never know how long the murals are going to be there and who is going to see them, but you've got to do it anyway.

*ROS: Actually that leads me onto your current work- I've been looking at the map on your website which is really interesting, do you want to talk a bit more about that and the work you have been doing over the last few months?*

DEANIO: Yeah. I've been in lockdown, me and my housemate who are also an artists, amazing artists – Tasnim Mahdy. We always talk about collaboration so we just seized the opportunity that we could go around together in possible ways. I had my bike. Whenever we see hoardings we wanted to offer messages of support, obviously people are going to [be] isolated stuck in their very local environment. So we just thought if we could put as many murals as possible to kind of, you know, to let people know that everyone's going through it, we're all thinking of it. Some people are dealing with it more directly, we could spare a thought for those. So we just thought that if we could put them in as many locations around London that would be a nice thing to do, and before we knew it we had done quite a lot. Someone recommended turning it into a route that people could cycle or they could journey during their exercise hour - that was when we were really limited.

So that's what we've been doing. It's been really nice when people have got in touch and that they've seen the murals in all these different places, so yeah that's basically the Stay Strong Route, this idea that there's a lot of challenges and it's hard to find an answer but all you can really do is commit to stay strong including yourself. That's what we're trying to do that's the message.

*ROS: Obviously Windrush day is a day of celebrating achievements of the Windrush generation but asking those difficult questions and having debates*

*about what it means to people today, especially around the scandal. So I just wanted to ask you, is there anyone you want to celebrate in particular with regards to Windrush and can you tell us a bit about them.*

DEANIO: To be honest no, I think that any opportunity to celebrate my family and where we come from and the millions of people that reflect that very same journey, it's not an individual thing. There are so many, so much and so great the pool of variety that comes from migration and I think also it's important for me, you know, the Windrush generation and the Windrush scandal is part of something. It's part of a massive timeline and you see images of different points.

For me there is so much study that has gone into it now, there is so much beauty in the history that is hidden and that is everything I try to make my art from. That is the ancestral legacies of where people from the Windrush generation and beyond have come from. So I guess everybody who recognises they come from a place who recognises the worth in that, I wanted to say that no individuals, but the entire pool of people.

*ROS: I was just going to ask one last thing before we clock off, which was I remember when we first kind of talked about having a conversation and showcase your work for Windrush at the [National Maritime] Museum, you mentioned that your body of work has a kind of, you always kept going back to waves and water in everything you have done. I wondered if you just wanted to talk about that a bit?*

DEANIO: yeah I think like the water I don't know, water I guess is a very well-known understanding, it's what's keeps us alive so there's no life as we understand it without it. But also it's special that it's taken humans and all life on earth to all reaches of the planet. We think of boats and we think of things that humans make to put on it. But ultimately without water there's none of it. I'm very interested in it and always tried to reflect water in the work, and especially because there is a link to the understanding of water and its link to migration.

It is more present and a more definitive part of the history of the transatlantic slave trade, because it is hard to find out where your family is from, it's hard to

find out where slaves were moved, it's hard to find out that information but there is a kind of instinctive something or other that people were there in the water and the water transported them for better or for worse. I don't know I still haven't found the words or way of understanding it but it's just a kind of... there is no life without water, and the heaviness of that maybe.

*ROS: That's a nice place to end. Thank you so much, it's been really really lovely to chat to you.*

DEANIO: Yeah that was nice.

*ROS: Thank you for being up for being involved in our Windrush Day celebrations and conversations and look forward to seeing you again soon.*

DEANIO: Yeah definitely yeah.