

## Profile

### Zinzi Minott

**The dancer-turned-artist, who trained as a lawyer, brings all these areas of expertise to bear in her exploration of her Afro-Caribbean heritage, creating her own form of ‘physical archiving’ that deals with the legacies of slavery, racism and the black diaspora.**

‘When I see people raving, or jogging after work, to me that’s just them screaming: this is my fucking body.’ Zinzi Minott is talking about the tactics we use to muster some sense of order over our physical selves. Achieving this feeling of connection is a daily struggle for the artist – words like ‘dysphoria’ come up often during our discussion – from a combined alienation induced by capitalism and the particular context of her ancestry. This continuous, underlying sense of external pressure and violence, as well as a feeling of bereavement, emanates from a shared sense of suffering for her forebears – her family tree includes two Windrush-generation grandparents. During our conversation, we also touch on the surname Minott, which can be traced back to a family of plantation owners, whose holdings extended across Jamaica, Barbados and Guyana.

‘That scream stuck deep down in your throat is not yours alone.’ This is a line from Minott’s video *Fi Dem III*, the third instalment of a work that conveys the pain of inherited trauma but also of rage – its more energetic, hopeful partner. At Transmission Gallery in Glasgow earlier this year these subjects found physical form in the sculptural component of her exhibition ‘Bloodsound’. The exhibition included a transparent sound-system constructed of clear acrylic speakers half-filled with glycerine and red food colouring that pumped out a jarring, glitch-filled, bass-heavy form of avant-garde dancehall. ‘It was this huge, ostentatious way of taking up space ... I wanted to have a conversation about black people’s bodies in cultural production and communal genius but also, crucially, about how non-Black people relate to black bodies and black culture, which is quite consumptive.’

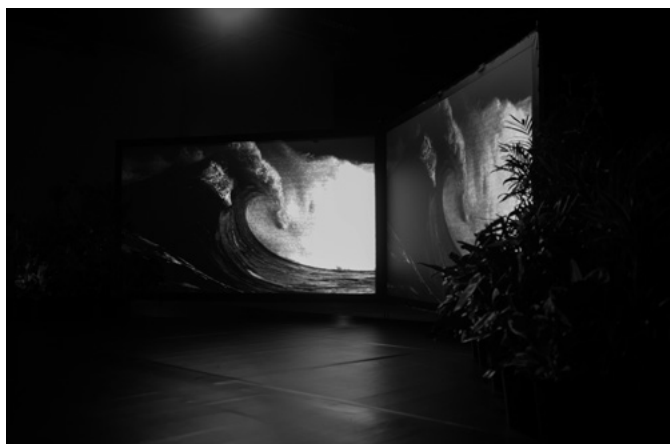
The metaphor supporting the piece is subtle in a way that perhaps belies the booming quality of the work. The ‘flattening’ of black musical culture outlined in Minott’s accompanying exhibition notes – an appropriation of genres, styles and motifs that erases the histories and lives that gave rise to them – is counterpointed by ‘this huge, three-dimensional object’.

It is filled, metaphorically, with blood, bodily stuff. We are forced to acknowledge the embodied experiences that birthed the music, as well as the historically loaded associations with physical violence and exploitative physical labour.

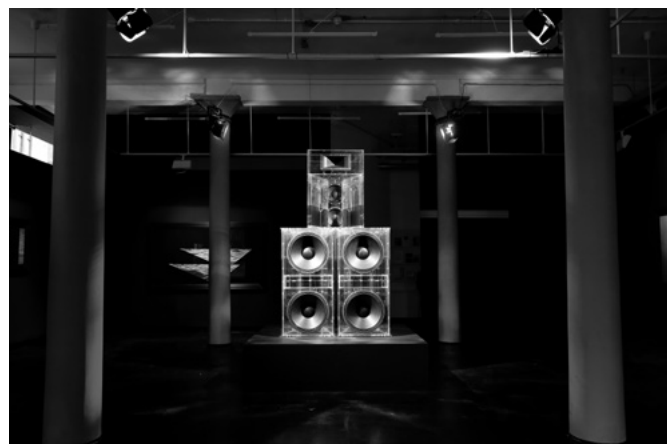
‘I wanted to reference the slave ship in the way I used the architecture of the space’, Minott outlines, ‘but without being crude or disrespectful.’ The layout of Transmission’s building is such that you first arrive in the basement. In this dimly lit realm the first four iterations of the *Fi Dem* sequence played in tandem (another has since been made, following the roughly annual cycle of Minott’s production). The soundtrack that plays on the ground floor and accompanying prints are both excerpted from this series of work: ‘I wanted this idea of things coming up from the hold of the ship.’

Filmmaking is perhaps the middle-point between Minott’s dance practice and her sculptural and two-dimensional practices – a way of making that she has only recently found the ‘confidence’ to embrace. ‘I moved from one of the most intangible modes, dance, into a pretty intangible mode, film, and then into tangibility with prints and sculpture.’ Minott’s prints, some of which depict childhood portraits or family photos obscured by shards or blocks of colour, can be seen as a further important checkpoint on her move towards ‘tangible’ media. Minott refers to the visual interferences on her prints as ‘the glitch’, a visual motif that encodes the effects of racism. Furthermore, the triangular shapes suggest the triangular economy of the slave trade, while the prints as a whole suggest the intergenerational biographical details that anchor the *Fi Dem* sequence.

Initially produced without gallery support, the *Fi Dem* pieces have a diaristic quality that suggests their creation is for the artist’s own needs. Recordings of a solo trip to Jamaica and family parties in the diaspora make up much of the running time; additional footage is created by the artist’s uncle, who records various social scenes in Barbados. The shots of waves, of Minott dancing in the street and on the beach, of games of dominoes, and of family and portrait snaps, are interrupted by snatches of echoing background noise, political speeches, plummy-voiced postwar newsreel, dancehall and reggae music. Digital interference starts to take hold: colour schemes are inverted or distorted, screens suddenly turn black or neon. Distinctions in volume become more pronounced, the qualities of rhythm and timbre more aggressive.



*Black on Black*, 2022, installation view, Baltic, Gateshead, photo Rohan Ayinde



*BLOODSOUND*, 2022, installation view, Tramway, Glasgow, photo Mathew Arthur Williams



*Black on Black*, 2022, performance, photo Kofi Paintsil

Allusions to The Middle Passage are clear. A recurring shot shows sugar cane blowing in the breeze. But ‘the biggest thing *Fi Dem* is reacting to’, according to Minott, ‘is the Windrush scandal’. ‘When I started making the series in 2018, I was dealing with people that I loved in risk of deportation or detention. My gran was a Windrush nurse, my grandad was a Windrush carpenter ... I don’t have words big enough for the fury I felt.’ *Fi Dem I* focuses on what might seem more biographical themes: travels to and from Jamaica, the artist’s family and their lives in the UK. But *Fi Dem II* and *III* explore the wider political context through footage of the HMT *Empire Windrush* landing at Tilbury docks, and snippets of text and speech referencing various post-war legal acts that sought to manage or offset immigration from the Caribbean (‘Our Jamaican Problem’, reads one Pathé News headline). Minott’s legal training is evident in her choices of source material.

Taken as a whole, the series conveys a quality of panic and rising anger, underscored by visual and sonic repetition (though it’s worth noting that this is offset by the affection for the artist’s family and for black culture ingrained in the imagery). In *Fi Dem III: Ancestral Interference*, the song lyric ‘I’m so tired’ is repeated until consumed in waves of interference. Indeed, repetition can be seen as a key formal trait across Minott’s oeuvre. We discuss the multiple resonances of this trait, from the intergenerational trauma of enslaved families and their descendants to the daily struggle to conduct oneself with poise and positivity as a black Brit in the face of continuing acts of aggression. The artist refers to a motif designed early in her career, a triangle that reads: repetition, duration, exhaustion. ‘I’m obsessed with those three things.’

Minott’s dance-based practice conveys the last of these qualities – exhaustion – clearly. For her 2021

performance *Black on Black: 24R*, currently nominated for the ANTI Festival International Prize for Live Art, Minott repeated a solo dance composed of phrases referencing the history of black music and movement. This was a way of codifying an idea of ‘physical archiving’ that resisted the pull of linguistic documentation that she associates with white-master narratives of history. But the sheer fatigue-inducing qualities of the piece pulls interpretation in a different, darker direction: ‘It’s also about the physical labour of slavery, the repetitious, laborious cutting of cane, picking of cotton, making of sugar, birthing of more enslaved people.’

Then again, there is release in repetition. If one can push through the physical pain associated with repeated movement or bodily exertion, one might achieve a sort of clarity: a sense of momentary wholeness, the type Minott observes in the masochism of the post-work joggers. ‘The experience is so intense if you can push past the pain. When I’ve had these durational experiences through dance, I also think back to the plantations, and I wonder if people were able to experience these moments of pleasure while they were picking and chopping for hours in a row. I hope so.’

It is the ephemeral liberation to be found in bodily motion that sustains Minott’s practice. ‘I’m interested in finding agency in your body in a world that doesn’t want you to have it. If you can understand what that agency feels like, and you can chase it and hold onto it, you’re lucky.’

Zinzi Minott’s upcoming projects include performances of *Black on Black: 24R* for the closing weekend of Brent Biennial, London, 9–11 September, and at ANTI Contemporary Art Festival in Kuopio, Finland, 13–18 September.

**Greg Thomas** is a critic and editor based in Glasgow.