

## **Bold Tendencies 2021**

### **Q&A with Harold Offeh**

**To start, could you give us a bit of background on yourself, such as where you studied, where you're currently based and some of your key interests as an artist?**

Hello. To give you some background information, I was born in Ghana but grew up in North London. I studied at the University of Brighton and the Royal College of Art. I recently completed a PhD at Leeds Beckett University, where I also teach. My main interest as an artist is performance, in its broadest sense. I think about performance as the relationship between the tasks and actions I fulfill as an artist and the experience of the audience who encounters the work. I'm also interested in history, forms of play and popular culture.

**What first inspired you to become an artist?**

Good question. Partly other artists: people like Sonia Boyce, Keith Piper, Lubaina Himid, Ajamu and Sutupa Biswas were and are still huge role models. I realised that being an artist could facilitate lifelong learning and curiosity, this is why i'm still an artist.

**A key component of your practice is its ability to create communities and to educate people, often referred to as "social arts practice". When did this type of work first become important to you and why do you enjoy it so much?**

I think a recognition of social arts practice is something that slowly emerged out of the way I was working. I had lots of opportunities as a younger artist to work with people and communities and groups in lots of different contexts. I found that I learn more in a shared learning environment where there is an opportunity for social interaction and exchange. There are lots of different approaches encompassed by the social arts practice, but I enjoy the opportunity and challenge of working closely with other people.

***Hail the New Prophets* is the third in a series of projects inspired by Afrofuturism and realised in the Peckham area.**

## **Can you elaborate on the previous two projects and how this series has developed?**

*Hail the New Prophets* builds on two previous projects: *The Mothership Collective* at South London Gallery (SLG) in 2006 and *Futurama* at Peckham Platform in 2010. Both projects were inspired by Afrofuturism and jazz musician Sun Ra and the social and political power of speculating and imagining alternative futures. The project at SLG involved inviting a host of artists to develop workshops for audiences that responded to different ideas of the future or utopia. The project with Peckham Platform involved working with an amazing group called Leaders of Tomorrow which supports and mentors young black people. We used the history of world fairs and design to think about and propose future approaches to public space in Peckham.

I think both projects have informed *Hail the New Prophets*, in that I'm really invested in facilitating speculative and utopian thinking. I think we're increasingly in a society where certain people aren't encouraged to imagine and think beyond the everyday. To my mind, so much societal change and advancement has come from people proposing seemingly impossible ideas: gender equality, the abolition of slavery and queer liberation were and perhaps still are visionary and utopian goals.

## **The title of the new commission is partly a reference to Charles Atlas's 1986 film, *Hail the New Puritan*. Why was this a meaningful reference point for you?**

It's a brilliant film! I love how it celebrates Michael Clark and generations of post-punk artists. I'm a bit of a geek for titles, I love how that title is a speech act, in saying it you acknowledge the existence of the thing you're naming. The title also acknowledges the arrival of someone and that felt appropriate for the arrival of a spaceship.

## **The spaceship design is inspired by the Mothership in the film *Space is the Place* (1974) which stars Afrofuturist Jazz musician, Sun Ra. Why were you drawn to the work of Sun Ra, and in particular this mothership?**

I think Sun Ra represents and offers a particular approach that is radical and visionary. As a black man he represents the power to shape your own narrative and identity. He embodied a mythic narrative he created for himself but also encompassed

others. It wasn't perfect and it wouldn't be my vision, but it provides the example of the power we have to realise and exist in the fictions and fantasy we create. The mothership is a powerful symbol of transformation and transition.

**The spaceship also doubles as a playground sculpture — where did the idea to activate the ship in this way come from?**

I have a real love of the history of artist's design playgrounds. Artists like Nikki de Saint Phalle and Isamu Noguchi created these amazing interactive and imaginative landscapes. I love artists who engage with everyday contexts.

**In advance of the spaceship's arrival in 2021 you organised a public Open Call for people to contribute their own "messages for the future" — what was the reason behind this, and how will it contribute to the final work?**

I really wanted to extend an invitation as widely as possible. Again, I'm interested in spreading the process of imagining the future. This was particularly timely in 2020 where with the pandemic and lockdowns people were having to reflect on the present situation and speculating on a post pandemic future. My aim is to broadcast many of the audio contributions from the ship itself and provide links to video and images created. The experience of the ship should be a platform for these other visionary prophets.

**How do you think about your new commission in relation to the Bold Tendencies 2021 programme theme of Arcadia?**

I think Arcadia is a great theme. I think it's closely related to an idea of utopia as this imagined but unobtainable place. To me, it evokes this space of play, joy and wonderment which are many of the things I hope for the mothership's arrival.

**What have you got planned for the rest of the year — are there any special projects in the pipeline?**

It's hopefully going to be a very busy and special year. With delays caused by the pandemic and lockdown I have lots of projects due to open. Just after Bold Tendencies has opened, I've got a commission for a children's play area at Bluecoat Contemporary Art Centre in Liverpool, opening in May. I've made a new video installation for the Wellcome Collection in

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London that opens in July. The work explores themes of social dancing and joy as remedies for social trauma and tragedy. Then in September, I co-curated a group exhibition in Birmingham with Eastside Projects called *Loop*. The show explores the relationship between performance, the body, time and technology. This is in addition to another two shows, *Untitled* opening in July at Kettle's Yard in Cambridge, and *Reading the Real*, opening at Leeds Art Gallery in October. Fingers crossed!