

New Times, now it's Old Times...

As someone interested in the intersections between Art, Technology & Music I was fascinated by a mention I saw of a local project which put hip-hop MCs from disadvantaged areas of Oxford right in the heart of artistic privilege: the Ashmolean Museum.

With its displays of the remains of empires gone (Roman, Greek, Chinese, oh wait, they're still expanding theirs!) the Ashmolean contains statues, paintings and other examples of 'high art'. With the help of BG record label owner, producer and director of the Young Women's Music Project, Zahra Tehrani, this group of young lyricists and 'spitters' translated these ancient wonders into modern miracles of sound.

I talked to Zahra about the event and how it had affected the young people involved.

Dot23: So how did this project come about? What was your inspiration?

Zahra Tehrani: George, the cofounder of artisjustaword has a strong link with Jude at the museum, she runs all the educational side of things, he observed that BG (a label set up to support vulnerable young men) & YWMP (whose aim is to empower young women interested in the music industry) were performing in youth clubs, grotty clubs and literally any place that would let us in! He said it was about time we got the chance to use somewhere as prestigious as the Ashmolean as a platform, he believes our young people deserve more.

From my perspective it was a great opportunity to get the young people inspired. The streets, their environment and life experiences inspire them to write; stepping into a space with so much stuff to write about just opened up a whole new world to them.

.23: Could you describe what it was like for these young men and women perform in the Ashmolean for the first time? Did they find it daunting? Elitist?

ZT: I think some of the BG boys felt more put off, the girls that came along were super excited and intrigued by the experience. The boys who showed up felt they were being judged at first, some of them got really freaked out in our first visit, felt really overwhelmed, didn't know what to write about, contemplated pulling out of the event, after a little encouragement some prepared some amazing stuff from researching online and writing from the heart, some were really relaxed and wrote their pieces on the day, some fit some existing work to an object they found, some free styled completely off the top of their head!

Here's a few sample lyrics -

"Am I not good enough to hang in your gallery
Do I have to be mirrored and captured, always harrowing

...

Am I too ill at ease, begging on my knees to be accepted into these frames of glorified pornographies?

F**k, did I say all this standing in a gallery, a fallacy.

.....

Set me free, in ease, I'll rest in peace hanging in your gallery

Display me" - CJ

"I stand here in this land, that my ancient ancestors called home/
My strands of DNA, crafted upon 7 hills of Rome/
These ancient domes, these zones of an empire fallen/
....

The duality of life, wrapped up in these half written, spitten myths/
Sacrificing lives to satisfy crowds of blood lust/
We ask, what did the Romans ever do for us?" - Andy Hill

And one of the examples of feedback we got from Rapper N-Zyme

"Performing in the Ashmolean on a busy Saturday reminded me of a flash mob almost, the extrovert leapt out of me, the adrenaline coursed through my veins as I looked each gobsmacked audience member in the eye, my brain ticking over trying to weave the mish-mash of inspiration around me with a thin string of lyrics whilst trying my hardest to stay coherent. The acceptance of the urban poetry by the mystified gawkers is something I will always treasure and remember and take with me the next time I perform."

.23: what do you think the intersection of art and hip hop is?

ZT: Street art is one of the main elements of hip hop, I think it could be embraced more in Oxford, mixing art and music and having them respond to each other is really important, it encourages a different kind of creation, captures a moment much more, there just needs to be more space for exhibiting and collaboration.

.23: How would you like to develop this idea further? Do you have any future plans?

ZT: We have 2 workshops and an event booked for Pitt Rivers [Anthropology Museum], planning to make beats out of sounds around the museum, write lyrics then showcase in June/July.

Since hooking up to do this interview, Zahra and I have been collaborating on an extension to this project, which hopes to bring some of the young rhymers and writers from BG/YWMP together with some experimental and professional musicians to create improvised music in response to Art created by contemporary artists in some Oxford Art galleries – we're in discussion with the North Wall, Modern Art Oxford, Art Jericho and OVADA. Let's hope something exciting happens this spring!

Links:

<http://youtu.be/-oBvhcdbwOA> video of Rythmn and Poetry at The Ashmolean, Feb 2013

<http://www.artisjustaword.org.uk/>

<http://www.wearebg.co.uk/>

<http://www.ywmp.info/>