

NT interviews Harold Offeh

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NT: Harold, I'm really happy that you can do this and I've got loads of questions for you, I hope you don't mind. I'm interested in how Being Mammy came about. Could you tell me something about that?

Harold: Yeah, I'd always been interested in Hattie McDaniel as a cultural figure and I was working with Picture This, a moving image commissioning agency based at Spike Island in Bristol, and they'd approached me to develop a new work as part of a commission. There was an opportunity to work with moving image archives in the South West and through some initial conversations they mentioned the Bill Douglas Centre, which is an archive at the University of Exeter. It's an interesting moving image archive because it's object based. It's not a film collection of moving image, it's movie memorabilia and material culture related to the history of film.

I spent a few days there. I'm sort of disobedient, when I go to archives I'm not into pre-research and coming down with codes and all that stuff. I just want to wander. Luckily they allowed me to wander and I came across a researcher that had previously been looking into *Gone with the Wind*. There was a whole file of weird *Gone with the Wind* memorabilia, artefacts and stuff that this researcher had collected but then had given to the Bill Douglas Centre. Super idiosyncratic like old Hollywood magazines, articles; and there was a subsection on Hattie McDaniel and Mammy. This was an opportunity to ask who Hattie McDaniel is.

I knew she was the first Black person to win an Oscar, and that was a big cultural moment. And I framed the project around this idea of wanting to look at Hattie McDaniel as this figure, particularly after reading the biography, and explore this narrative of her and what happens if you're a typecast actor. You're having to perpetuate a stereotype that is problematic.

It was really interesting, for example, she came from a family of entertainers, her father was an entertainer, but they were part of a minstrel troupe. I didn't know that Black people were minstrels, and it blew my mind. The idea of Black people doing blackface. That seems to be a really, weird effed up metaphor for the performance of blackness. For the white gaze obviously.

Then really thinking about the rest of her career and this cultural high point, her narrative was really complex. Towards the end of her life she was getting all this criticism from the civil rights movement for perpetuating the mammy/maid stereotype, but she had a TV show in the '50s and again played a maid to a white family. She was quite pragmatic about that. I was really interested in the complexity of that. How do you strategize within the constraints of the world that you're living in?

The project seemed to unfold thinking about the dynamics of racial stereotyping and misogyny. What I saw was how somebody tried to navigate that, not in a perfect way, but trying to be honest. Then I came across this brilliant piece by Tracey Moffatt, an Australian artist, called *Lip*. She's an Aboriginal Indigenous Australian artist - really amazing work. *Lip* is a whole series of Hollywood clips that she's found of women of colour who played the maid, or the sidekick in Hollywood films. Like the sassy Black friend, which is still a trope now.

Obviously the character in *Gone with the Wind* wasn't imagined as a slave, and I was really interested in that because often the way that Hattie McDaniel and people talk about that character is that as much as playing the stereotype there's some kind of transgression in the way that she interacts with the white characters as well. You know, she wasn't able to go to the opening in Atlanta for *Gone with the Wind* because people were really worried that loads of white folks down there had problems with that character. The producers told her not to go.

NT: Was that because her character wasn't subservient enough in *Gone with the Wind*?

Harold: Yeah, and there's a bit of that in Tracey Moffatt's *Lip* because she talks back to Scarlett. She's not always deferential but obviously you can't get away from the fact that she is still a slave. And the romanticization of the South.

Coming back to *Being Mammy*, I'm interested in this idea of perpetuating a stereotype. I think that was partly inspired by Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*, which is a film that I love but some people hate. Even now I think no one talks about *Bamboozled*.

NT: Yeah, it's the one no one wants to talk about.

Harold: I don't want to say people didn't get the film but it was satire and it was interesting that people didn't really connect with it as satire. It was trying to challenge media culture and tokenism. You have this Black executive trying to hustle by reviving the minstrel show; I was really interested in this idea of perpetuating the stereotype. *Being Mammy* spun out from this idea and I guess it's a strategy that I've tried to use a lot, not necessarily always successfully but trying to bring that historical specificity into a contemporary context.

This idea came about, of me inhabiting the stereotype, perpetuating it and creating this weird installation and various iterations. To point, direct and talk to the Hattie McDaniel narrative but also the wider history of that mammy character, which obviously has most currency in America but has some resonance here.

I'm really aware that for me, this is also about drag, a man performing as a woman. Thinking about drag as a critical strategy. The thing that I'm interested in about drag is that it's not about women, you know it's not about any real woman. But what it does is reflect gender. And it reflects gender norms and the problems of that. I'm mindful, we've just lost bell hooks.

NT: Yeah I know.

Harold: I remember reading her writing about *Paris Is Burning*, the whole phenomena. The interesting thing about drag, as much as I enjoy it, it really highlights the problems around gender and our perceptions of gender because it exaggerates it. I was interested in this idea of dragging Mammy as a way of gaining a purchase on the character.

NT: I'm glad you mentioned that, because that was one of my questions actually; whether the aspects of drag came into the role. I thought it was very interesting that you were playing Mammy and not her male equivalent, like Uncle Tom or the coon, or Sambo. I thought that was interesting. I want to know your thoughts about that, the drag aspect. Did you think it would get in the way at all?

Harold: No, I was aware of playing blackness to predominantly white audiences. Also, this thing about minstrelsy, where you're actually performing a projected idea of blackness. There's a very specific thing about the mammy character that the character is sort of asexual but also sexual. I think in a British context it's like pantomime.

NT: Yeah, Pantomime Dame, definitely.

Harold: There's an aspect of that. There's also a childlike naivety. Most people associate the mammy character as much with *Gone With The Wind* as with *Tom and Jerry*.

NT: Yes, Mammy Two Shoes.

Harold: She's kind of disembodied. It always resonated with me as a kid. I felt it was possible, partly because there's a sense of it being quite benign as a character and I was aware that would bring the character into proximity in a way that some of the other characters wouldn't. I think because there's residual affection.

NT: She's non threatening.

Harold: Yeah, also I was trying to create these awkward situations. In performances I come up with these rules. Like the openings, if I was dressed as Mammy I'd be working, because Mammy would be working. I'd be serving or cleaning. Partly to bring people into proximity but in a more critical way. Lots of people were uncomfortable about it's presence, but lots of people weren't.

I was really amazed, I mean this happens a lot with people that do drag, but people were always grabbing the costume because I had all this padding and stuff. In particular the breasts and the bottom.

NT: Really? People felt safe to do that? Wow!

I really felt that you were Mammy, you really embodied that character.

You talk about seeing this image as a child. I'm curious about what you thought about these images when you saw them?

Harold: Looking back I think I was just very naive. I remember the first time I saw it I must have been really young, maybe under 10. She just reminded me of one of my aunties.

I didn't know about the whole thing; the film flattens out the horrors of slavery. The slaves in the field whistling dixie; it romanticises and flattens it out. So on a weird level I made a slightly different connection with the idea of a matriarchal Black woman. It just reminded me of all my aunties. And she seemed to be in charge and she was more of a mother to Scarlett than her mother was.

NT: I can't even remember the mother, if there was even a mother present in the story.

Harold: I connected with the characterisation McDaniel embodied in that role. I certainly didn't think she was a slave. I don't think that registered until much later, as a teenager. In some ways, as a naive interpersonal connection it's that thing that you project your own experiences and narratives onto things. I think that was a naive impetus for being interested in that character and then when I discovered later on as a teenager, the politics of her winning the Oscar for that I was shocked about a Black person winning an Oscar in the '40s. I always thought that Sidney Poitier was the first. I didn't realise McDaniel came before.

Then I watched Whoopi Goldberg do this documentary about Hattie McDaniel and it was really interesting to think about Whoopi Goldberg's career. How she traversed through Hollywood playing roles, and really lionising in this documentary what Hattie McDaniel had been. There was Louise Beavers as well.

NT: That's right. There were quite a few who always had to play maids, I think Ethel Waters did as well. And [Juanita Moore] from Imitation Of Life.

Harold: I'm particularly thinking about Black Hollywood and with blaxploitation in the '70s, but all those characters are like arrays, because there's a new drive in terms of Black consciousness, Black power. Those characters sort of don't... people felt they were compromised or that they sold out or they weren't literal Uncle Toms, they represented Uncle Tomerry, in terms of playing to the world.

When I saw Whoopi Goldberg I was really interested in her reverence for what Hattie McDaniel had gone through. I think of McDaniel like a radical pragmatist. The quote that I used in the show was, 'I can be a maid for \$7 but I might as well get \$700 playing one'.

NT: Exactly! That famous quote!

Harold: I liked the honesty of that. There's a puritanism in our heroes, fencing those archetypes. Particularly within Black culture, they have to be pure. They're totally uncompromising. I guess the Rosa Parks narrative, which is obviously important, but as someone who's actually really true. For example, when you read Malcolm X's book it is like there were the compromises that led to a certain point of militancy but it wasn't a pure life lived in radical militancy. I mean, who does that? It doesn't necessarily reflect the honesty of the day to day experience.

NT: With Hattie McDaniel, she's a product of her time. It's her trying to exist and eke out a living within the constraints that society is imposing upon her, and the acting industry as well. It's so easy to forget when you're living in the present and things have moved on. You don't know what people in the past had to deal and contend with. The times were different.

Harold: Absolutely! And I think that sense in which you know those performers were having to operate in a very rigid, debilitating, disenfranchising structure and system. There were only certain types of roles you could play. Like the old Hollywood Hays Code where any international relations were so codified on screen.

NT: I don't know if this question is relevant then, because I suppose you've answered it. I was going to ask what you think you learned most about Hattie McDaniel, or how did your opinion possibly change?

Harold: I think it became a lot more sophisticated. I had a greater sense of the different compromises that she had to make in order to sustain a career.

There was this uncompromising desire to be visible, be present. In her Oscar acceptance speech she talks about representing the race. I think she felt she was part of a bigger narrative; trying to enact change. For me, it's a different kind of radicalism. Sometimes there's a radicalism which is based around a refusal or a boycott. I've come to use this term 'radical pragmatist.' People might say she's a sellout because she was working within the system but I think that sometimes that's necessary. There is an ecosystem of change, where you need a mixture of different agents.

People enact a number of roles that collectively bring about structural change. Sometimes, that's people working within the system trying to make small changes. Even if it's saying a line. That's what I love about *Lip*, The Tracey Moffatt piece. You see these actresses working a lot. It's like, I'm gonna be the sassy Black friend, but I'm gonna push it. But you also need those radical political figures that are outside shouting in. You need to destroy the whole thing. I think you need both and I feel like sometimes we celebrate one more than the other because there's a kind of purity in one. It suits those people that are uncompromising. There's a romantic admiration.

NT: It makes me think about Sammy Davis Jr. He got a lot of flack towards the end of his career, but he was very involved in the civil rights movement. He campaigned for Las Vegas casinos to be desegregated. I suppose it comes into this thing of certain histories being hidden, or overshadowed. People not really comprehending the complexity of what certain people go through in order to achieve what they achieve. And that seems to be something that you are quite interested in eeking out, these hidden histories and overlooked narratives.

Harold: Definitely. A lot of artists are motivated by a desire for self learning and that's certainly been a key driver for me in exploring some of these histories. The richness of it, and the complexity. I think even the stuff that I did know was often very reductive or oversimplified. History is messy, people are messy. Situations are inevitably compromised and complex, and people do contradictory things. For me there's a richness in that, I'm drawn to those narratives and complexities.

I realised one thing with this project was that it was created in a British context. I remember doing a talk in the States, at Ohio University, in a small town called Athens, Ohio. There was a senior African American painter who was at the talk, and he had a very particular question. The premise of it was 'how as someone of West African heritage do you have a purchase on this African American history?' Which I think was an important question to bring forward, something that hadn't come up previously.

There's a conversation that happens all the time within African diasporic communities. In particular, people who have North American and Caribbean African heritage and people who have continental African heritage. One of the things I did say to him was that my entry point into this is through popular culture.

NT: Exactly, yeah.

Harold: There's a currency of African American culture, but also the playing and performativity of blackness is something that resonates with me. I know it's a different history. I felt the subtext is that some African Americans genuinely feel, and I remember the discussion when Obama was elected, this whole thing about not having heritage of enslavement and what that means. And for some people that was a particular thing about Obama. His heritage was from Kenya. For many, having Michelle Obama as an African American with a heritage enslavement was the more significant thing.

But yeah, that really highlighted the nuances in black cultural perspectives and African diasporic cultural perspectives, which is a really urgent concern for African Americans in terms of the specificity of their experience. I mean you've seen it in a different cultural sphere with people like Samuel L Jackson, criticising Hollywood for hiring black British actors. That was a real learning moment, in terms of thinking about the work and the dynamic of the work, and really thinking about the currency of those characters, or that stereotype for some African Americans. It was really important to check myself and to think about it.

NT: Yeah, I can understand it. Obviously it's cultural. I don't see it as cultural appropriation, there are differences and there's parallels and I think it's about tapping into that with these tropes and stereotypes. Fair enough, you know it's coming from America but there's a ripple effect, whereby it impacts the whole African diaspora, and I think that's what I picked up on as a kid.

I watched the mammy character, I'd see it on TV or in films and even though I realised it's set in America I realised that Black woman is supposed to represent my mother. It's supposed to represent my grandmother, it's supposed to represent my aunt. I'm looking at this character, I'm thinking, well, does it? I could see the artificiality of it.

I remember watching Gone with the Wind and I did think of that character in Tom and Jerry, Mammy Two Shoes. It's like she's as real as that; she's not real at all but yet she's supposed to represent close family members. I remember watching it and finding it really confusing. Also watching it and she's mothering these young ladies and I'm thinking, where are her children? There's no back story around her and her family life and it seems like she's always sacrificing

for others. What's going on here with this really peculiar character? That's the thing that stuck in my head as a child. This weird, secular character that I knew was supposed to represent people around me but I couldn't see it, just couldn't relate to it.

It's stuff like that that I think is so good when it bubbles up to the forefront with artwork or the artwork brings about these discussions. That question that the professor asked, it's those kinds of things that make the artwork itself really rich.

I want to know, you mentioned the Bill Douglas Centre, and that it had lots of objects and artefacts to do with film memorabilia. The objects that you had in your exhibition like the spoons and stuff, was that coming from the Bill Douglas Centre?

Harold: No, not directly. There was a cutout mask of Mammy's face and I think there were some stickers or memorabilia. I remember I was doing some research at the University of Michigan. There's a museum of racist memorabilia, which has an online portal. I was looking through and they had a whole Mammy section with Mammy memorabilia. So a lot of the artefacts are based on these real objects that were Mammy memorabilia. Like peg boards and peg dolls and spoon dolls. I guess the equivalent in the UK is the Gollywog character. A seemingly benign children's character that perpetuated that currency that the Mammy character did.

So I spent all this time making these, and then at some of the shows we held these Mammy sewing bees, inviting people to make these objects as a way of creating a discursive forum. For me, the whole material culture was highlighting that power of the stereotype; the archetype and how it was perpetuated and culturally ingrained. But also the benign celebration of it.

I think about Kara Walker's work. The brilliance of Kara Walker's work in bringing home the horror. Cleverly adopting those Victorian silhouettes, but also using that to bring the horror of murder, incest, rape, violence and mutilation. The creation of cult object through the commodification. Because some of the projects are commercially viable but a lot of the stuff that I thought was really interesting is that people know there's a whole process when you make a doll, you're identifying with a characteristic in the making of that.

Obviously it's just a reflection of how blackness is treated. As a commodity, as value or as something that exists not only as physical and embodied in flesh, but within the realm of imaginative space. For me again, that was the whole horror of the industrial complex of racism. How it's formed through these child-like objects. These probably, little white kids, are probably making little Mammy dolls, and have their own Mammy.

NT: Yeah, it's industrialised and perpetuated throughout society. That's really interesting.

*Another question for you, because this is something that obviously comes up a lot in your work, these ideas of reenactments and gestures. I was really interested in both the photographic images and the form as well. The gestures that you had, for Mammy, were those taken directly from the gestures that Hattie McDaniel made within *Gone with the Wind*, or were they from general Mammy characters and other films as well?*

Harold: Yeah, that's a very good question. I think a lot of the ones I was particularly looking at were Hattie McDaniel's performances. Not only in *Gone with the Wind*, but in other things, because she had a very particular way in which she played quite broad.

I was really aware of that whole reel which is called Mammy's looks. I guess it's partly from vaudeville and minstrel shows. There are stock expressions, it has to be broad because you're playing to a live audience and you have to communicate to the court. That's very different to film acting obviously, where you can be a bit more subtle. Louise Beavers is a better actress, as a film actress.

NT: Yeah, it's true!

Harold: She is just more subtle, there's more depth in her expressions, not dissing Hattie, just, Louise Beavers is a better film actress.

I was really intrigued by these stock looks that you get, with Hattie McDaniel through the various characters. The angry, then the chastising, but sometimes she's a little giggly and girly. There's a series of these stock looks that she plays, that are very broad. Sometimes they play into the whole thing, bulging eyes with that kind of surprised look. My thing is wanting to deconstruct some of the component parts of the architecture of the stereotype. There are component parts; structural walls that the stereotype is built on that people identify with. Expressions and gestures become part of our lives.

Paul Gilroy talks about Black Atlanticism, and this whole deal of memetics, how colonial subjects have had to take on these forms of performative survival strategies. Speaking the Master's language or nice forms of entertainment and performance. I became really interested in this idea of performativity of minstrelsy, or a certain conception of blackness that's formed through the white gaze. It felt important to try and materialise that, as I was trying to navigate the different elements of it and externalise that through the work.

NT: I thought it was really interesting when I was looking at the images and the photographs in the film. I was like, 'I've seen that one, seen that one, I've seen that one', they were all familiar, and then really disturbing. Sometimes when you distil certain things like that and place it up. It was quite insidious, quite disturbing. Seeing that and being so familiar with it and recognizing it.

Harold: It's interesting, thinking about the movie *The Help*. Octavia Spencer and Viola Davis are both in that. I was reading their reflections back, because that film is 10 years old.

NT: Yeah, yeah I think it's like 2012 or something like that.

Harold: Yeah and Viola Davis was saying that she wouldn't have made that film now. It's the discourse moving on. Particularly because there were elements of Octavia Spencer's performance, she was the sassy one!

It's so interesting that her and Viola Davis' character have slightly different strategies on how they're navigating that situation. It's amazing to have two Black Mammies but you know, different flavours. At the time I just remember thinking it's amazing what scraps you'll take.

NT: A hungry belly will eat anything. Isn't that an expression?

Harold: Again, the stock looks. You can see them in particular Octavia Spencer's performance.

NT: Thinking about stuff like The Help, do you think you'd make a work like Being Mammy now and if you did, what do you think you'd make different or change?

Harold: Good question. I don't think I'd go about it in the same way. Partly because I think the discourse and discussion has moved on and I think I was aware of making that work for a white audience and for the white gaze, perhaps, that's what would change.

I think just the way that discourse has changed, the currency of images has changed. I was wondering whether I would position myself in the work in the same way I did. The reason I've often done that is because I'm interested in what's gained from an embodied experience of something. Which I'm still invested in, but it's difficult.

At the time, I felt that it was a kind of urgency to just go for it. Now I think I'd be much more aware of the politics and the nuances of those gestures. Like, what does it mean for me to inhabit this at this point. And that narrative as a subset within the work, building upon all these other histories and narratives. I think maybe something I would have done differently is to have

framed things a bit more tightly around Hattie McDaniel. The work used Hattie McDaniel as a portal into the wider stereotype through that character.

Actually, I feel like maybe what I feel more connected to is Hattie McDaniel's story, and what that speaks to in terms of this radical pragmatism an actor has to negotiate. I feel in some ways it also has a richer kind of connection. There's some musing, but I wouldn't do it the same.

NT: Do you think part of that is because the Mammy character has become a historical character, less prominent? Whereas, back in the day you'd have on BBC Two these black and white movies. They don't even show Tom and Jerry cartoons anymore I don't think! She's become somewhat archaic, not so prevalent and not so known.

Harold: Yes, that's absolutely true. I mean, thank goodness!

There's less sense of a popular, cultural kind of resonance, certainly for a younger generation. I remember at certain points after the project talking about it but you have to give the full context to people who hadn't seen *Gone with the Wind*.

I think it's very different, not operating with that same currency of references. Replaced by I think, more sophisticated, more interesting archetypes.

NT: Some are, but she's still lingering, hovering, slightly shifted.

Harold: A sort of subset, sassy Black woman is still around. Asexual, invisible older Black women as well.

NT: A matriarchal kind of character, yeah.

Harold: Then, you have the sophistication of now having black writers and directors. I mean it's interesting that it's very much a younger generation. Like, Issa Rae with *Insecure*, Lena Waithe with *Twenties*, and obviously Michael Coel! You have sophisticated, nuanced, fully rounded characters that aren't reduced to one attitude or, sublimated or secondary in relation to whiteness. They exist in fully formed worlds where there are other Black people.

NT: I was thinking about your work because your work touches upon themes that I'm very interested in: aspects of the gaze; power dynamics; repetition. Bodies in particular, there's no getting away from it because we are Black artists, Black bodies. Reenactments, gestures. Also, what I really like about your work is the humour and the dry wit.

Sometimes it's so refreshing to see that within art. It can be such a communicative bridge, to enable people to engage with the work. How do you manage to balance that?

Your work is not trivial. There's serious intent behind it, but you're still able to get the humour

and dry wit into it without undermining the work. How do you manage to traverse that?

Harold: Yeah. It is a difficult thing. I've been conscious about what can be afforded by a particular sensibility. I'm always aware of the conditions in which people encounter the work; how the terms of those conditions can often set how we engage with something. Trying to find ways of allowing people to engage with the work on different terms, on different levels. I find humour and absurdity, sometimes irony, a way of creating that connection. And it is often the way that I have connected with material.

There was a point in my career early on where I had to make a decision, am I really interested in framing things around notions of blackness and representation and politics of identity? I was seeing other people remove blackness. The body disappears. You're going to work with text, or you're going to work with abstraction. That for me was really effed up. I thought, I don't want to do that.

NT: You said 'as a young artist', when were you made aware of that? Was that art school?

Harold: Yes, that was art school, towards the end of my BA course.

NT: Ditto. That's really interesting because that's something that I've had conversations with other Black artists about, that's something that they've said as well. I realised very early on, this is a minefield. When you start talking about issues of race and identity. People become so uncomfortable.

Like you said, you have to make a conscious decision, am I going to go there or am I not? And then what, and how does that impact my work? Am I being truthful to my work? In terms of censoring the work that I'm making. Not even allowing myself that kind of creative freedom because I'm concerned of how others are going to perceive my output.

Harold: Yeah, the awkwardness, so much awkwardness and so much silencing. I just decided to play with that a little bit and sometimes lean into the awkwardness. Or, just highlight the ridiculousness of those kinds of situations. I got better at being more confident, not necessarily worrying about how the work is received. Being more confident about the terms on which I engaged with things; trying to allow for a multiplicity of entry points into the work but not overly worrying about how it might be received. Just thinking, OK, I'm going to be talking about race. This is a predominantly white institution, maybe the audience won't be okay with that, whatever.

NT: And that must be liberating to free yourself from the shackles.

Harold: It is. I know you teach as well, but it's often the thing you see, particularly in students of colour that are negotiating and going through that thing. Everyone has to find their own way through that, but I'm still seeing it now. I'm still seeing people trying to chart a course through.

NT: Yeah, I call it the acceptable face of Black. This perceived idea of what Black art must be or should be. Or, how it should be represented and if you steer away from that people find it difficult.

Harold: Yes, I agree absolutely. The thing I've been doing in the last few years though, is also trying to make whiteness visible. So those questions that are applied to people of colour, I ask to white artists. If there's a white figure, whiteness is visible. And I think that's a really important thing; there's always a sense in which whiteness is invisible.

NT: And global.

Harold: In the way that Bruce Nauman isn't a 'white man'. He's just talking about absurdity, he's talking about nihilism or place of language. But is now a very old white man. I try to talk about that. Because the absence of it is so weird. I find this is part of why we have white supremacy. It is that the whiteness is invisible.

That makes people feel awkward, but I feel like they have to experience that a little bit. I'm not trying to reduce the work, it's obviously about more than just that. Surely everyone has a cultural identity.

NT: I think it still comes into play.

Harold: I was really interested in the way that *SAPPHIRE* is structured, in terms of how it positions the viewer watching it. I was aware of it being a generational conversation. I wanted to ask about the conditions of the encounter. I'm coming to it as a middle aged, Black man. I'm really interested in the way it addresses me. The dialogical, the conversational and how it's within a world but speaking also directly out. I'm interested in that approach for you.

NT: Yeah, the thing is when it comes to the ideas behind the Mammy and the Sapphire, it's so rich, it's so complex. I didn't want to make a work that was preachy and didactic. I thought of these two characters, well I think of all four characters because you've got the Jezebel you've got the Mammy, you've got the Sapphire and you've got the Tragic Mulatto. I think of all four of them as sisters. And so that was where I was coming from.

Thinking of the Sapphire and the Mammy as two sisters, if Sapphire was talking to her sister Mammy what would she say to her? The words she's saying to her would give an understanding of this relationship, a bit of insight into her older sister, the Mammy. I viewed the Mammy as an older sister, she's usually an older woman; she's old fashioned. She's something that's kind of fading away, even though aspects of her legacy are still there. Then I felt to make it even more direct to the audience, put them into the position where they are the sister.

So you have the character talking directly to us, the audience, to make that connection. I was really hoping that people would see it and be like, 'yeah, this is perhaps the kind of conversation that has happened with my sister'. Or, when you're trying to say something to a loved one or a close family member, maybe you would trot about the house, speaking to yourself, or thinking about this conversation. Especially when you're having to broach a difficult subject with a family member you rehearse certain things in your head, or how do I say this to someone without hurting them, making them understand where I'm coming from?

For the first part she's addressing Mammy and talking to Mammy, and then the latter part she's really talking to herself because she's not perfect. She's complicit in all of this as well. I wanted to make something, whereby people could come to it straight off, still be able to engage with it and not necessarily have to know the wider context of the Sapphire and the Mammy.

I think that's something akin to your work. What I really like about your work is the accessibility of it. You don't have to have an art history degree or a philosophy PhD. That's the real strength of the work. You can have all these different audiences engage with it on different levels. You talk about having different entry points to your work. I think that's really important.

The really rich work is where you'll watch it once and take something from it, you watch it twice you see something else. You research some of the context then you watch it again and you see it with different eyes. The key of really good and interesting artwork is that it communicates to an audience, it makes that connection, that contact which I think so much of your work does.

Harold: Yeah, SAPPHIRE'S really affecting work. Something about that work being staged in a domestic space. Maybe because I was watching it on my laptop in the kitchen, but I was interested in that. It could have been formally delivered but the sense of intimacy and familial subtext to framing that conversation, I just found it very effective. I was gonna ask a bit about the scripting. How was that developed?

NT: Writing it was really hard. There were lots of things that got crossed out. I thought that was really difficult.

Harold: Did you have to go into the space of Sapphire? Some writers talk about becoming the character.

NT: Yeah, I had to really believe I was talking to a loved one. I was baring my heart, really trying to explain myself. That was foremost in my mind so that people could connect to it, and so that it could make sense as well. It was really hard because the only time the writing started flowing was when I figured out that the best approach was to take that sisterly approach. Once the writing started flowing and I felt happy with the writing then I felt, OK, this is something that other people will be able to relate to as well. It was difficult, and I didn't imagine how difficult that would be.

I found the relationship between the two, the Mammy and the Sapphire, really interesting because like we've said, the character of the Mammy is fading away. However, Sapphire and her sass, it feels like she's just here to stay. If I think about certain actresses, especially Tiffany Haddish, it seems like any role that she's in, she's that sassy angry Black woman. The legacy is really strong. Even Leslie Jones, she's there if they can't get Tiffany Haddish.

But there's so many actresses who have played those roles and characters, and it's still here and strong so it seemed very fitting that it should be Sapphire talking to Mammy. Not Jezebel, not the Tragic Mulatto, who is another character that's kind of faded away as well.

Harold: I think you're doing that thing that is really important, anchoring the contemporary discourse in a historical narrative to make that important connection. But, also recognizing the evolution and the possibility of change and transformation.

NT: I think that's also why the monologue of Sapphire was important. That was a departure from the normal way that I work. I'm very interested in gestures. A lot of the time you don't have additional dialogue. That's something that is very much evident with your work. You allow people to focus on the gesture, and you're not distracted by dialogue. Sometimes you'll have additional music, but you really get to absorb the movement and focus on a communication that's often overlooked or not considered enough. For this work, it was the dialogue that was far more important, so there was less of that consideration of gesture and movement. Although she does move around the space. She's upstairs when she's talking to her sister, Mammy and she's downstairs when she's addressing herself.

Harold: The common denominator is this address and intimacy. I feel like the power of *SAPPHIRE* is how it really tuned into the dynamics of that. The proximity and closeness and the address to oneself, the address externally. The conversation. I feel that often people are having conversations with these things, even if they're not in the know. Watching a film or even watching football, it's so close. And then there's a weird intimacy, dialogical space that's created by the online. I don't know whether it's something you would return to or not? In terms of the idea of making a work specifically that exists within that space.

NT: I do want to make another film. I was thinking about the Jezebel, she's still going strong. It feels like I can't do the Sapphire, and then not do the Jezebel.

It's been really interesting to get a good insight into the way you work. I really enjoy your performances. They're really rich, complex, nuanced and the fact that you're in them. I think it's the conviction of your performances. You really go for it. So often when I see other performances, I think that's what's lacking, but you're you're really in it. You're really in the moment. I think it's really hard to do that because you have to be so full of conviction, you have to have a certain mindset to be able to engage with the work in that way. It's really hard but it's really effective.

One last thing I would like to say as well, what I really like about your work is how you're able to involve such a large range of people, a multitude of people. In so many of your works you engage with different groups of people. I think that's so interesting how you're able to do that.

I don't know how to describe it, but it seems like with the work that you do there's a commitment and it doesn't feel like you're swooping in and out of this conversation/dialogue that's going on. It really feels like you've got a kind of buy in/purchase. I don't know how to describe it, but that's what I find really interesting. The work that arises because of that is so different and so rich. I really like that. I like how you're able to engage with all these different audiences that perhaps wouldn't engage with art or consider that they're working with art. I think that's really great because that's another power of art. The ability to reach all these people.

Harold: Thank you, that's really amazing to hear you say that. I really appreciate it. I am a huge fan of what you're doing and what you're making.

I talk about my practice as being framed by learning, and I feel like in most situations where I'm working with other people I'm thinking about how to frame that co-learning. Thinking about how to create situations of exchange. And, sometimes having to get art out of the way. I think

the perception of art can be inhibiting. I talked about this analogy of people not confronting art. Like they're an empty vessel and they have to go to the art, and the art contains all the knowledge and then they just are meant to fill up on it.

You're bringing the knowledge. You're bringing this really rich history. And it's actually about a conversation with it. It brings its own set of stuff, so I'm always mindful of that. Again, these terms, by which things are happening. I'm still working on it.

I'm not always worrying if it looks like art. Particularly when working with other people. Here's the situation, there's an opportunity, and just let what it is, be what it is. Can I really challenge myself? For me personally, it's really central to my practice that there are these exchanges of knowledge and experience in these learning contexts. They're the ones that are still like art school. Maybe it's my art school, maybe all these things are the art school. Working in schools or working in youth centres or at my art school, it's where I get challenged. Where people are like, 'why are you doing that?' I feel more uncomfortable in exhibition spaces, to be honest. You're expected to know everything.

NT: It keeps your work potent, dynamic and fresh. Like you said, that exchange that you get something from it. Engaging with other people in that way is so important. It's not this self indulgent exercise.

Harold: The generosity, intelligence and the distillation within your practice is really fantastic.

NT: Thank you, I appreciate that coming from you.

Harold: Well, it's been a real pleasure, I'm so excited about *Untitled* being in Cambridge, my hometown. I think I saw the show.. eight times. Various friends were coming up and wanted to see it. It was really great to spend time with all those works, and especially your's. It's been a huge hit.

NT: Thank you. Thanks for the opportunity to do this Harold, I really appreciate it.

Harold: Thank you. I've enjoyed it.