

Local Voices S3E7 - See Black Womxn

Air Date: 6.01.21

Length: 34:55

Music: AWEN - Your Voice

Produced by: Supervillain

SPEAKERS

Francesca D'Alessio, Angela Hennessy, Tahirah Rasheed

Francesca D'Alessio 00:04

In a technology and social media driven world, we all seem to be increasingly looking at everything through a global lens. We are at a point now where creators and collectives are increasingly focusing on bringing up and amplifying hyper local conversations, issues and movements. See Black Womxn is a Bay Area collective of artists and activists, curators, and writers raised on black feminist theory. Through art, in theory, See Black Womxn are telling their own stories as well as their community stories in order to recognize and affirm the beauty, diversity and complexity of black women and their aesthetic traditions.

See black women, hear black women, trust black women, love black women, protect black women, pay black women.

Francesca D'Alessio 01:10

So tell me about the collective of See Black Womxn. How did it get started? How was it built? You know, the process of all of it.

Tahirah Rasheed 01:18

Basically started with Angela and I's personal relationship and building out a way for us to see each other learn each other understand each other. And I had came to Angela after uttering those words on a panel about a project where we could work on the campaign around how the San Francisco Arts Commission treated artists Lava Thomas at the time. So it started out as a collective, maybe not even actually a collective but a project in a movement.

Angela Hennessy 01:50

Yeah, it began within the context of our relationship and you know, really thinking about how black women see and hear and understand each other. I had been a member on the selection panel for submissions for the Maya Angelou monument that Lava Thomas was selected for. And then after the Visual Arts Commission dismissed our nomination, that community of black women and beyond really came together to understand you know, how selection panels function, what the process was, and you

know, what it meant for the Visual Arts Commission to dismiss our nomination and really kind of uphold a particular narrative around who was going to, you know, represent Dr. Maya Angelou for this monument. There was a standing room only panel discussion one night and part of the closing of the panel as we were all, you know, kind of saying our final words, I said some words, what became the manifesto for See Black Womxn. And that kind of, you know, was a moment to launch a particular idea that really, you know, tapped into a sort of collective recognition of how black women are so often invisibilized and undermined and not recognized for our work. And for our contributions. It was actually at the

Tahirah Rasheed 03:27

It was actually at the de Young Museum at the *Soul of A Nation* opening. It was the first time that I was introduced to Lava Thomas by Angela. And I talked to her about wanting to help out about what was done. I thought it was an atrocity. Even though like Yes, this manifesto was spoken at this time, the standing plays, I think, for black women just in general on how we are unrecognized and invisibility, I think is something that's really important. That is like you're thinking about it if you're a black woman, you're experiencing it, if you're a black woman, as an artist, like Lava Thomas is what Angela witness being on the panel, but also in other areas in other workplaces, right in your neighborhood. I mean, look at all these black woman being shot, look at Ma'khia Bryant, just murdered, right look at the hyper visibility of her skin as a black girl that is this excuse that people are allowed to treat black women violently. And so whether it is being murdered by police or the San Francisco Arts Commission revoking the commission, it is all these things that black women experience at a rate phenomenally higher than any other race or gender. And so it's this idea of we are not free until black women are free. So while yes, you know, there was an approach to Lava Thomas in 2019 full circle at the de Young.

Angela Hennessy 04:54

You know, there was so much energy it was the opening night you know, it was an opportunity to see the black community in general, you know, show up for that event. And, you know, it really speaks to what happens when, you know, we're able to see ourselves within museums and within institutions that, you know, we show up for each other. So that was a really beautiful moment, it was one of those nights where, you know, all the luminaries were out. Yeah, and you know, part of that, because that was in October. And then by I think it was January, they announced the second RFQ. So they, you know, really what was happening was that there was this attempt to sweep the 2019 RFQ under the rug, and to just move forward. And we decided at that moment that we couldn't allow that to happen. And you know, at that point, See Black Womxn was really just T and I, and, you know, we kind of informally launched a boycott against the San Francisco Arts Commission, you know, primarily through Instagram. And that was sort of the beginning of the what became the bigger campaign, you know, after calls for transparency and for conversation and dialog so that we could understand what they were actually thinking, and, you know, wanting also to be heard, right, and there were a lot of questions in terms of what had actually happened. And, you know, we weren't able to have any conversation with them, they weren't open to having any conversation with us. So that was also, you know, part of what propelled See Black Womxn and, you know, our really organizing and rallying the community from the Bay Area and beyond, but that was really the beginning of it was that, you know, we weren't going to stand for that, because, you know, in this particular situation, it was Lava Thomas, and this monument for Dr. Maya Angelou, but, you know, it could have been any one of us. And so, you know, we were

really thinking about, you know, if it was me, or if it was T, or if this was happening to any, you know, one of the incredible artists around the Bay Area, you know, we would want the community to show up. And so we kind of took it upon ourselves to, you know, to be that community to support Lava in, you know, gaining clarity and actually really understanding what was happening.

Tahirah Rasheed 07:23

It starts at home, you see things that you experience happened to you. And something that I always learned and I stick to is that you start something locally, and hopefully it'll spread globally, which I think that this has, so stand up for what's right, where you are, where you can do something, and then you start a movement away.

Francesca D'Alessio 07:42

Absolutely. I mean, that's what's so powerful. I didn't realize it was the two of you really kind of driving this force, because you're powerful. I mean, it felt like a big protest. So I mean, amazing that it was started by the two of you with power and integrity. And I think you're right, I mean, these situations must be happening all the time, if they so easily, so Cavalier could have done that to Lava. So I think by forcing these conversations, you've changed culture, because they're now thinking about their accountability, their integrity. I mean, this is such a game changer in terms of these institutions with power and privilege, and how they connect and how they interact with artists. And you did that. So thank you.

Tahirah Rasheed 08:24

Well, we did that. And also the people here and Oakland in the Bay Area did that because another thing I learned from my parents and reading organizing is that you want the things that you do to spread to other people, you want people to feel like this is theirs, you want them to feel like this is their language. I don't think it is just us I feel that it is everyone who feels empowered. And that's always the hope

Francesca D'Alessio 08:46

100%. And it's grown, I mean, you've proven that that's true. So where is the collective now? Who are the members? Because I know it's powerful, it's large.

Tahirah Rasheed 08:59

Angela, and I brought on Dana King, to Jamani Montague who is co-founders. And we don't necessarily have members at the moment, because we're still figuring out the structural foundational framework, whoever wants to be a part of it, why women should feel empowered to be a part to take up open, like start a chapter, but it's something that we're working on.

Francesca D'Alessio 09:21

I couldn't love it more. I mean, I think it's so important and so powerful, you know, because it's putting it on the ground, power to the people, you know, these situations come up who is supporting these artists, who is you know, fighting for the rights of artists, and it's you. So thank you, and it's a larger collective as well, but it's so important.

Angela Hennessy 09:39

That was really, you know, the vision right from the beginning. And I have to give T credit for the idea that you know, that we could actually build a movement, you know, and build something that was about uplifting black women about seeing black women, something that was sustainable, and growable, right, that it was never really just about, you know, what we were doing with this initial campaign, but there was always this kind of bigger vision from the beginning. And, you know, I mean, at that point, you know, when T came to me with the idea of starting a campaign to support Lava, I mean, I was already exhausted. So, you know, to me, and I remember exactly when, when she came to me with this idea, I was like, that sounds like a lot of work. You know, like, that's where I was coming from was, yeah, it's a great idea and how are we going to do that, you know, slowly, kind of inch by inch, it started to grow. And then it really just took off. And there were a few, you know, events that we did, I had some artists talks on Lava had an artist talk, you know, in early 2020. And then in February of 2020, we did, we kind of had a big launch at the Black Joy Parade, in downtown Oakland. And that was a really beautiful moment where we really got the word out about what had happened. And, you know, what we were proposing what we were trying to do. So that was, that was a big, exciting moment to really generate, you know, community wide education and, and understanding, but that was kind of the spark. And, you know, the manifesto, I think, really caught on with people in terms of, you know, what we were asking folks to do that began with seeing us, right, see, seeing us, hearing us, trusting us, loving us, protecting us paying us, you know, so it was really about then lifting up these values that, you know, when the I think that was really the moment when See Black Womxn became, you know, this sort of larger collective group that, you know, we had started with this campaign, but then it just kind of grew and it, it took off from there.

Francesca D'Alessio 11:56

I love you both so much, because I can imagine, I mean, all the things you do teaching and art, I mean, you have a full schedule, when T comes and says let's start a global movement, you said yes. And you did it, and you're doing it well. And you're creating a safe space for so many. I mean, it is just so needed, and so important. So you know, the world is just grateful on top of all you do, as your plate runneth over here, you're still maintaining this, it's so it couldn't be more important. So maybe let's kind of backtrack and talk about the monuments coming down. But what are your thoughts on the monuments coming down last summer, and what should replace it or what should not replace it?

Angela Hennessy 12:35

You know, I find it really interesting, the need or the desire to save and preserve monuments, I think, you know, when the community responds that a particular monument needs to come down, or when a monument is removed as a form of protest, that is really something to be listened to, I think, you know, there's often then a rush to fill that space with something new without actually generating the kind of conversation and the inquiry that needs to happen as to why a particular monument might have been removed in the first place. So the rush to kind of jump over or skip over the historical structural racism, or the way that the victors, you know, are the ones who tell history, right? Because that's a big part of it, like our monuments, so many of the monuments in North America are dedicated to, to the victors, right, whoever won the war, whoever had the most money to put up, you know, to build a sculpture of themselves, and to basically tell their version of history as they wrote it. And so to recognize that those histories are steeped in racist, colonial patriarchal expectations, and you know, it's a very particular

gaze, right. So, when the people show up and tear down a monument, then you know, it's like, people need to be paying attention to what's actually happening and why it's happening.

Francesca D'Alessio 14:15

Because, you know, these monuments are almost timeless, like we are reinventing what people in the future will look back and see who we were as a community who we were as a people, you know, these monuments represent our culture. And it really is a lot of pressure on us, I think, living in this time to figure out what those monuments look like. I mean, what would you suggest having input from community like, what, what would it look like? What is your ideal process look like of rebuilding?

Tahirah Rasheed 14:44

I think it's not that much pressure. Actually. I think the pressure has been taken off of us because people were tearing down monuments that represent rapists and colonizers, so I think the pressure has been taken off of us by like, hey, look, we're tearing this down, because it doesn't need to be here. So instead, let's do this like cultural equity initiative, where we create this process of place making, right. And so I am fully believing in the execution and design of public spaces that incorporate the community and represent hope for the community that represents and promotes health and safety that people who are in North Oakland unhoused pushed out by gentrification they can go and they can see this Afro pick as a sign of hope that represents black movement, Black Power, an all power to all people. So I think it's not hard. I think the pressure has been taken off of us. And there are artists who have and are able to create monuments that incorporate place making. As an abolitionist, I take mentorship from Ruthie Gilmore, who talks about abolition, is about presence. It's not about absence. So it's about building life affirming institutions. And if you're building life affirming institutions, that means that you are building with a mindset and idea to incorporate life affirming assets. I mean, it's

Francesca D'Alessio 16:18

I mean, it's so powerful the power of art, to see a piece that represents you that you're familiar with that empowers you and inspires. I mean, whereas what is being torn down is a tool of the oppressor. I mean, it just is there to make people feel insecure and question themselves, whereas, you know, these pieces really do the opposite.

Angela Hennessy 16:38

Well, I think also, you know, it's about, you know, how do we define power? And what does power look like? And so, if you think about colonial oppression, you're talking about power over that is about dominating, right? And it's about discipline and punishment, and forcing people to submit. And so when you think about how black women have, you know, coming from marginalized position from an oppressed position, that, you know, the kind of power that we are trying to generate is about empowering people, right? So how do we bring people in and co create what it looks like to be powerful and to be empowered, without diminishing someone else's power, you know, that there's actually space and there's room for all of us to, you know, to be like these, you know, alive, living breathing, people who are fulfilling, you know, we're all fulfilling our individual gifts and bringing our own resources to the table and that there's space, and there's room for everyone. So it's a really different way of thinking about, you know, what, what power is and what it looks like. And then so beautifully said,

Francesca D'Alessio 17:55

And then so beautifully said, I mean, absolutely get rid of any hierarchical, whatever nonsense, you know, and the power of representation. I mean, when a young girl walks up to a monument and can see herself there and sees herself immortalized as a hero. I mean that you can stand up taller, you have pride, I mean, it just is life changing, life affirming.

Tahirah Rasheed 18:16

I feel energized constantly by being in West Oakland, and walking past my home, walking past Esther's Orbit Room on Seventh Street. Every time I walk my list, open bar station, I know what used to be there. I my mother was a great documenter. We have I have pictures of West Oakland before 1970 before all of this gentrification, and I saw what existed before. So I'm always just constantly energized by the actual land, and the place that I'm in and the people who are still creating culture. And I think one thing that I've recently learned is that whenever black people get together, which I see a lot happens still in West Oakland, we are creating culture, right? Like if you look at other cultures, like Asian culture, Indian culture, African cultures, because they didn't have the severance of kinship from being taken from their homeland, they have a history of culture. And I noticed that what's so special about West Oakland is that I see black people come together often. And when we're coming together, I never knew it never had a name for it. But what I see happening is that we are creating culture that we didn't have,

Angela Hennessy 19:42

Well, I would just add, you know, that it's a really it's an active practice, you know, so understanding cultural continuity and finding ways to restore and repair and reclaim lineage. You know, that's, I mean, it's a lot of work. It's a lot of work for sure. But there's a way I think that you know, one of the things that's so incredible about Oakland is the way that people come together and the way that community comes together to support each other, and even you know, I'm, I live in West Oakland, now. And so right down the street is the spot where Huey P Newton was murdered, you know, but then right across the street from that is Jill Christina's house where she's got the women of the Black Panther Party mural going in, and then Dana King's, bust that will be going in, you know, at the other end of the block on Mandela. So these are, you know, women and people who are, who are showing up and reclaiming and rewriting history. So that becomes a really active, you know, kind of position to, to take up and, you know, part of why, like we do, the work that we're doing is so that we can, you know, really create a more accurate story, right, we can we can create a more accurate history. And it's also I think, I would say, you know, its histories, plural, right? Because, you know, we all come from slightly different positions and lineages, but it's about how we come together and show up and really thinking about, you know, what does it mean for like, the younger generation to be coming up, you know, how are they going to be growing up in this neighborhood? And who are they going to be, you know, looking to, and who are their heroes going to be, because it's really necessary, you know, that, that we hold up, you know, the, the leaders and the people that we have looked up to, you know, in my generation, or in T's generation, but then always thinking about who else is coming up after us. I mean, I just keep thinking about this with the Black Panther Party, and all of the work that they were doing in the 60s and the 70s. And how that, you know, how we understand what the Black Panther Party was doing then is now like, so incredibly relevant, and like, finally getting some recognition for the work that they were trying to do, you know, 40-50 years ago. So, you know, it's just, I mean, it's like, finally, you know, finally,

Francesca D'Alessio 22:20

And you're right. I mean, I, I've heard stories, too, about the women of the Black Panther Party carried the weight, and are finally being acknowledged, you know, through the work of Erica and Jill Christina, and, you know, all these amazing people you've mentioned, but it does, you know, it takes a village, it takes a village. Yeah, you know, I mean, they the power of activism is gathering, you know, the right to gather publicly, and the power of the oppressor is separating people and then feeding them information individually. You know, it's when people can get together and really brainstorm and connect is when movements happen. In terms of art, and activism, what is the role you see of art, or the power of art in terms of activists and language to? I mean, I think art is its own language.

Angela Hennessy 23:08

Yeah, I think, you know, that's really one of the beautiful things that has come out of 2020 is that we really got to see how artists were showing up and building connections, you know, I think more explicitly between art and activism. And so, you know, like, so many, I mean, you know, the conversation for a while was all about, like, the pandemic was about taking a pause, and, you know, being at home, baking bread and stuff like that, which is all really beautiful and wonderful. I know, for myself, and I know, for T, and for a lot of the women in our collective like, we didn't get a pause, right. So we were busy showing up and, you know, all kinds of platforms and, and events, and, you know, really supporting, you know, people out in the street and supporting protesters, and really thinking about how art, whether, you know, it was in our own practices, or in a, you know, more visible kind of public forum, but how images and objects, like the things that we were, you know, making in our studios or, you know, whatever kind of images, we were posting on Instagram and things that, that those became opportunities to generate conversation. And so that's really, I think, you know, one of the key things I'm, I've been identifying lately, you know, if you look around the Bay Area, and you think about, like all the murals that went up downtown, or, you know, even amongst, you know, for us, I See Black Womxn, the billboard that we did in Bayview, and, you know, all of these ways that we were using our aesthetic orientation and our aesthetic concerns to then channel that into public dialogue and public conversation. So that you know, has been something that I think has just become, you know, even more clear to a lot of folks, maybe people out there who are questioning, you know, like, What does art matter in this particular moment? It's like, Yeah, because we're the people that are putting words together, putting images together, showing up in the street and using our aesthetics to communicate our values. And, you know, to create a vision of, you know, what things could be like, what things could look like, I'm really inspired by the abolitionists right now. Because really, that, to me, that's about creating a whole new vision of how we can live and be in community together that isn't about disciplining and punishing each other. And there are folks who are envisioning and actively building a whole new way of organizing and being in community with each other that is actually about protecting each other and making sure that everyone has what they need. And you know, that like defunding the police isn't just defunding the police, that's actually about redirecting those funds into communities and supporting people to have like the basic things that they need, you know, to be able to live and get out of bed and have breakfast and go to school or go to work or whatever is happening. So I'm just deeply inspired by the abolitionists right now.

Tahirah Rasheed 26:19

I did, I did want to make a little bit of comments on that, that question about the purpose of art, and how it relates to public art, I was thinking about the white gaze, and the positions of white people, as this perpetual man character, black life, and thought is something that we don't always get to see, which was the purpose of one of our black reactions, right, which is, if we have the opportunity to see ourselves, and I know our own art, like, why would we ever need to see these other like art that does not have or consider or situate or place black women, black people black culture at the forefront. So the importance I think of art being done by black people is that we are dissociated from that white gaze. And then we no longer have this idea that white people are the audience. So that's the importance for me as far as black art by black people by black women, which I think relates to the importance of public art being done by black people. I have recently been finding my identity through neon bending, and I had the first show that I ever had. So I'm at this gallery in Berkeley, and there's this huge red neon sign eight feet wide, that says, Breonna Taylor. And at night, it illuminates the entire block in Berkeley, right across from UC Berkeley. So I ended up getting these emails from the people at the gallery saying, Oh, well, maybe we could turn off the light at night, because pretty bright, it could be a fire hazard. And so I was thinking, no, it's not a fire hazard, because these wires are grounded. And the premier place where I got the transformers have a built in grounding, so it's double grounded. And I was thinking, actually, you know, this coffeemaker that you have downstairs, is actually exuding more voltage than his whole sign, which is the amount of one light bulb. This experience of this piece representing this woman who was murdered in her home. And they were trying to turn off her light and she's already dead. If you're not calling out the names of these people, how easy it is to forget them, that work that needs to be done, and how easy it is to forget the ways in which she was murdered by police. But here it was, I internalized it and got so emotional, didn't even understand why but that I was seeing that they were trying to turn off this light. It was bothering people walking by. So I don't know how to like change the narrative or how people talk about black or art. But I just see that turning the bright light of Breonna Taylor's name on bothers some people and how important that is to bother more people.

Angela Hennessy 29:14

Yeah, I think that, you know, that whole story about what happened with that piece, it's just, you know, that's like a microcosm of what we experienced as black women, you know, more broadly and that we are too bright, or too loud. We're too big, we take up too much space, like, you know, we're too angry, whatever it is, right. It's so often about being too much of whatever we're doing. And, you know, I think that that, you know, looking at like, yeah, okay, well, so this bright red light is keeping you up at night like, yeah, okay, and so what happens what happens when you're up at night and you actually have to contend with the murder of a black woman in her own home? In her own bed while she's sleeping, you know, then like, what's the next step? What happens after that? And so, you know, like, I just I really feel that it's like, yeah, more people should be bothered, more people should be uncomfortable, more people could be sleepless and actually be thinking about, you know, what they are going to do, you know, to solve the issues that we're facing as black folks, right, because this is a public health crisis. So if you think about it, in that sense, it's like, yeah, that then becomes a perfect example of what art can do in a particular moment, right. It's just like highlights and magnifies these issues that we're trying to figure out how to talk through with people. And I would just add to that, also, in terms of like specifics of how to actually shift that context of, you know, looking at black folks, or looking at black art, or you know, what the black aesthetic is, is that, first of all, we need like more black folks in our institutions, or we need to be building more of our own institutions, so that we're not dependent on a lot of white folks

in museums who think that they're doing something good, or they want to check off their diversity box, or their racial equity, whatever, because like, we're not here to just be lip service, and to make you all look good, if you actually want to support us, then that also requires a certain amount of trust, and like literally handing over like, you want to have a program that's talking about, you know, what black women are doing, then, like, give us that space to do that, you know, we don't need it to be, you know, done in some particular way to suit your audience, or to make your people feel good about their whiteness, or whatever it might be, if you want us to show up and like do the work, then like, you know, actually, let us do that. And we don't need for it to be like, all polished and manipulated into something else. And that's part of it, too, which I think sometimes, you know, folks out there non-black people who are curating work by black artists, or writing about work by black artists, but it's so often like getting polished or manipulated, to then perpetuate a particular way of looking at black folks, as opposed to just allowing us to speak for ourselves. Last year, there were quite a few interviews and, you know, stories that I contributed to in terms of publicity that we were receiving around the Maya Angelou monument, and I don't think I was ever actually quoted correctly, you know, and had to literally, like, fight over, that's actually not what I said. And here's what I said, because I wrote it down, and I emailed it to you so that we wouldn't be in this situation, you know. So that's, you know, I think also at the core is that a lot of people don't really want to give up some of that power, give up some of that control over what it all looks like in the end.

Francesca D'Alessio 33:06

My last question is just about the future. Where are we going? What projects do you have in the works? What can we get excited about? What can we look forward to?

Tahirah Rasheed 33:15

The future is, is full of black women creating, making space as we do, and I think this movement is going to take over everything.

Angela Hennessy 33:31

See black women, hear black women, trust black women, love black women, protect black women, pay black women.

Francesca D'Alessio 34:00

Collectives like See Black Womxn are pivotal and connecting communities and creating culture together. It has been such a humbling learning experience to be in conversation with all of these amazing artists, organizers and thought leaders. Thank you to See Black Womxn for sharing their process and their insight with us. We are grateful for all of the important work that you do. Join me next Monday as I speak with artist Lava Thomas about the transformative power of art and storytelling. I'm Francesca D'Alessio and I oversee public programs initiatives here at the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, and I'm your host for this series. Please visit our website: deyoung.famsf.org/programs/localvoices to find transcripts for this episode, and to be sure to subscribe to the museum's email newsletters to learn all about what's going on here at the De Young.