

Preston Caribbean Carnival and the meaning of competition: Sam Aylwin

Since arriving in Preston 9 years ago, I have been very fortunate to participate in and make large scale artworks that are worn or drawn on wheels for members of the participating groups who “jump up” and celebrate their cultural heritage and the greater meaning of Caribbean Carnival. Involvement with the community has shown me something of the deep and multi-faceted meaning that is behind this event. It has its roots in the Catholic observance of lent when many hundreds of years ago the Italians began a wild dressed up event on the first day of lent (Carnevale – to take away the meat). It hit a chord with people and soon spread to many other countries in Europe. It was exported to the Caribbean islands (and other countries) during the expansion of Europe and the slave trade. It is estimated that 6 million slaves were brought to the Caribbean islands. Banned from participating in the celebrations, they held their own masked celebrations partly to jest at their colonial masters and partly to express their power as individuals, drawing on their own rich cultural traditions. With the abolition of slavery, freed Africans began to host their own Carnival celebrations in the streets that became progressively popular and has grown into the festival we now know as Caribbean Carnival which was exported to the little town of Preston by the migrating Caribbean peoples in the 60's.

Winding my way down the road reflecting back on the last 2 months in the workshop. It is the most intense work I've ever been party to, where family needs and normal day-to-day is replaced by an almost insane drive to put the show on the road. All masked up, pushing a pram I'd turned the day before into a little car with my daughter who named it the JAH mobile (coincidence of my son's initials) I realised that making that unassuming piece, despite having thoroughly enjoyed the technical engineering of the compactable large scale pieces, developing the content with the bands, playing with and mixing messages in symbols, materials and mediums or even the thrill of seeing something of that scale stand on the road – had given me perhaps more pleasure. I concluded that the spirit of Carneval was in the way her eyes lit up in the “A-ha!” when she transformed pieces of foam, covered in shiny material, into the rear view mirror, wheel covers, steering wheel, the numberplate, the animated way she spoke envisaging her brother in his car, and could see she had reached that perfect state of being where thought and action are perfectly in harmony and creates self perpetuating energy. But most of all it was the way it allowed us to bond. This is the greatest outcome that any project can wish to achieve. I wonder if these kinds of moments are part of the assessment when the various eyes eyeball, nod, praise, acknowledge and photograph the passing spectacle. Is the public aware that Carnival is about the freedom of self expression and how would this affect how they view what they see? One of the criteria that Arts Council of England require for successful funding applications is the quality of artwork. I wonder as I often have about how this personal, qualitative concept is measured, and if this creates the kind of competitiveness that does more harm than good for community driven artform. I wonder if freedom of expression is compromised.

I googled “The effects of competition on society” and randomly selected a piece of writing entitled “Competition is destructive force in society” by Kaldosi. He says that apart from it being intrinsic to our nature, it is essential for change and innovation. He concludes that if used negatively it can cause aggression and would eventually harm our way of life.

I believe that it is impossible to separate the two aspects, with one comes the other like the presence of the shadow self.

While doing my teacher training we were taught that creating explicit criteria and using Carl Rogers' process of person centered learning would help create fair, impartial and accurate assessments.

Does having criteria inhibit the freedom of self expression? If I google this, Wikipedia provides me with the definition of Positive liberty as “the possession of the power and resources to fulfill one's own potential without external restraint.” What if some people have rudimentary craft skills or a naive handling of materials or whose objective is not to express themselves in the mode of popular aesthetics. Would these people feel inhibited to explore their creativity by adhering to a certain aesthetic or end up not creating for fear of being judged for some unknown criteria other than the desire to create and “jump-up” in the spirit of Carnival.