

FAQs

Thursday 6 – Wednesday 19 September

Wednesday – Saturday 11am – 6pm / Sunday 12pm – 3pm

Unit 4: The Cornucopia Room, Hawick

What is the Exhibition?

This is the first in a programme of four exhibitions to be situated within the town centre of Hawick. Alchemy Film & Arts' Exhibition Programme 2018 - 19 kicks off with this exhibition premiere of London based artist Onyeka Igwe's *No Dance, No Palaver*. You can find more information on each of the three films on the back of the exhibition poster.

Who is the artist?

Onyeka Igwe is an artist filmmaker, programmer and researcher, living and working in London. In her non-fiction video work Onyeka uses dance, voice, archive and text to expose a multiplicity of narratives. She has shown work at the London, Edinburgh Artist Moving Image, Rotterdam International and Hamburg film festivals. In 2017, Onyeka showed the film *We Need New Names* with Behind The Curtain's Feminist Film Club in Hawick.

The approaches she takes in *No Dance, No Palaver* reflect her wider practice: an interest in archives, use of dance, soundscapes/soundtracks and rhythmic approach to editing.

What is Alchemy Film & Arts?

Alchemy Film & Arts was founded in 2010 and exists to champion the development of independent arts and film related projects in the Scottish Borders and Scotland as a whole. It aims to advance the arts, by the practice, knowledge, understanding and appreciation of visual arts and film. Alchemy Film & Arts has produced eight editions of the Alchemy Film and Moving Image Festival, runs annual exhibitions, and offers further opportunities via community engagement programming, artist residencies and commissions.

What is the work about?

No Dance, No Palaver is a three-film series of works produced from Onyeka Igwe's research into the Aba Women's War of 1929, considered the first major challenge to British authority in West Africa during the colonial period and a historic example of feminist protest. Onyeka explores her own familial heritage and the wider context of this seminal uprising through archive footage, reinterpretation via contemporary dancers, and a narration questioning who these individual women were.

Experimenting with archival footage relating to Nigeria during the first half of the 20th century, Onyeka also questions the methods of filmmakers producing films from the Colonial Film Unit.

What is the Aba Women's War?

In 1920s colonial Nigeria there was growing dissatisfaction in the south east regions. Warrant chiefs, traditionally selected by election, were now being selected by the colonial government and local power had been growing steadily more oppressive and regulated. Plans to impose new taxes affecting women's livelihoods, combined with already rising figures of unemployment and local administrative corruption, led to protests in the late-1920s.

Thousands of women congregated in November 1929 in south east regions of Nigeria to protest the oppressive behavior of warrant chiefs and British Colonial Administrators, and new plans for market taxes on Igbo women. With no formal place for women's voices in the patriarchal governmental structure, traditional practices of dancing and chanting were revived: this practice is referred to as 'Sitting on a Man', which is also the name of the first in Onyeka Igwe's film series. After two months of protest, colonial authorities dropped the plans for further taxation and the power of warrant chiefs

was curbed. During the Aba Women's war 25,000 Igbo women protested British colonial officials. Fifty women died and a further 50+ were injured during this time.

What is the Colonial Film Unit?

Formed in 1939, the Colonial Film Unit produced over 200 short films, shown mostly to African audiences via mobile cinemas. These films included propaganda films encouraging support for the war effort and colonial administration. The films strived to project a modern vision of empire, and legitimise the work of the colonial government. The screenings also provided a way for the administration to reinforce organisational hierarchy, through carefully outlined seating plans.

Specific modes of production of the films involved reductive assumptions about intellectual capabilities of so-called 'primitive people'. For example, films would be slowed down and would avoid close-ups, cross-cutting, short scenes or excessive movement within the frame.

Why did Onyeka Igwe make this work?

Onyeka found out about the Colonial Film Unit when making a film about her grandmother. She had been looking for archival material from Nigeria and was only able to find colonial footage. She became interested in making work around the archive and the experience of the looking for oneself in a contentious place. Onyeka's uncle had written an autobiography in which he traced his birth to the time of the Aba Women's War, something she'd never heard of before. As a feminist and someone interested in the histories of politics and protest, Onyeka then began searching through National Archives for traces of it and found a commission report about the protest. Onyeka was interested in her own familial connections to the protests in Aba as it is near to where her mother was born. Memories of the protest practices were gradually pieced together through conversations with her mother's sister and friends. Onyeka's mother's voice features in *Her Name in My Mouth* reading out the names, singing folk songs and saying idioms she thought she could attribute to women of that time.

"I read some testimony from the women who had taken part but thought that all of this was refracted through a colonial lens. The women were talking through the bureaucracy of the British state. I've kind of grown up with these commissions - Macpherson, Iraq Enquiry, Grenfell. I guess I see them for what they are, ways to package history and for the state to escape blame. So, I was interested in making some work that could in some way re-represent the protests in another type of way." - Onyeka Igwe

Why did she choose film as the artistic medium for this work?

Onyeka works with film because of its multiplicity: it allows for the interplay of images, sound, text voice, dance, performance and more, all in one frame. Film also allows for multiple times to be present at once. *No Dance, No Palaver* deals with the blur between now and then, and attempts to further visualise that blur, so this was particularly important to Onyeka.

What about the soundtrack?

"In Her Name in My Mouth, I was trying to work with a composer to create sound as an echo, at a distance, a faint reminder of a memory. With Sitting on a Man, it was about allowing the present day sounds of the dancers to be present in the silent archival images. One of the dancers had said they she wanted to bring the sounds syncopation back to the archive so that was a key influence. And for Specialised Technique, I was trying to create disjuncture with the sounds, to create a space for the audience to look at the images in other ways: to alert them to something amiss." - Onyeka Igwe

Where did the artist find the archive material?

Onyeka used the BFI National Archive and The National Archive, via their online collections and by visiting them in Kew and Soho. She also worked with the Bristol Archives, which have a collection from the former Empire and Commonwealth Museum. Onyeka did some volunteering there, auditing and digitising their collection, which allowed her to form relationships with the archivists and see the extent of their collection.

Why is *No Dance, No Palaver* relevant today?

“When I first read about the ways in which the women protested - using their bodies and nudity - it reminded me of FEMEN (international women’s movement of topless female activists) and arguments around naked protest. Those arguments offered it as a new phenomenon, but there is a longer history of women, and people in general, using the tools at their disposal - their bodies to protest.

It’s relevant in that way, also, the ideas that the Colonial Film Unit had about blackness and black women specifically haven’t gone away and the types of images (shown in the films) themselves are still in circulation.

I think that in our society, the British Empire is not known much about and this allows people to argue that it was good, beneficial or did no harm. Making this work and regurgitating the archives is an attempt to circulate counter histories of the colonial past/present.” - Onyeka Igwe

What is Onyeka doing now?

Onyeka has been making a diverse range of work: a project on the architecture of prisons, and an installation looking at songs from football terraces. Her projects are united by a political line of thought, and the mixture of performance and archive. She’s working on a longer project now that is approaching archives in a different way, based around the concept of putting fiction in archives. It’s based in Nigeria and she hopes to see the other side of the colonial archives and what kind of practices emerge and exist in a different cultural space.