

brixton street studio

Photographs by Alison Locke and Chris Anderson

Backdrop painted by Loren Bevan

Opening on 16th January 2008

Exhibition: 17th January - 7th March 2008

Brixton Street Studio documents the unique cultural diversity of Brixton's urban community through photographic portraits of local people using a mobile studio and a painted backdrop. The aim of the project is to photograph a broad section of Brixton people going about their ordinary lives, photographed against a fantastic background that transports them out of this everyday context.

Hundreds of people were photographed with four different painted backdrops throughout summer 2005 and spring 2006. These were set up at the Lido in Brockwell Park, at the market on and around Electric Avenue, at four churches around Brixton and outside various bars and clubs at night.

These backdrops are painted scenes that reflect the spirit and style of the locations, but work as a fantastic context which also transforms the actual environment of the people photographed: at the Lido, a sunshine filled beach scene; at the Market, an exotic fruit, spice and veg filled stall; at the churches, a typical Caribbean clapboard-style church porch; and at the bars, a rum shack/beach bar by night. The idea behind the backdrops is to reflect those parts of the world, specifically the Caribbean and Africa, which have made up such a significant part of Brixton's history and culture. As well as reflecting this aspect of Brixton's history, the backdrops are also designed to create an aspirational destination. There is a rich tradition in studio photography around the world of presenting people in some kind of idealised landscape, and our exotic backgrounds are designed with this in mind.

Backdrop painted by Russell Eade

The project builds upon this global tradition of studio portraiture but also combines it with a tradition of photography that is more particularly British – that of street photography. Brixton Street Studio brings the photographic studio out onto the streets and makes portraiture accessible to anyone who wants to be involved and have their photo taken.

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A key element of the project is the production of a print for each participant. Each individual or group is given their print as a personal record of their involvement and, in September 2005, they were invited to view their contribution to this social document in the context of the overall project at the opening night of the exhibition at 198 Gallery. The aim was to create a community event that would attract a new audience for the gallery.

120 images were selected to reflect the democratic and inclusive nature of the project. Jerry Dammers of The Specials (who lives locally) mixed music, Mount Gay supplied rum, as everyone mixed, looked at themselves and considered our representation of their, and our community.

Backdrop painted by Audley Campbell

At the beginning of 2006, Tate Modern commissioned the final element of the project, which focused on Brixton's diverse nightlife and music scene. The backdrop portrayed a rum shack/beach bar and we took it out onto the streets during April and May and photographed people on a night out. The complete project was exhibited at Tate Modern in May 2006. In addition Tate also commissioned an interactive photographic workshop based on the original project, to take place in the Turbine Hall during the Long Weekend, the festival to relaunch the permanent collection.

Brixton Street Studio aims to provoke in those who take part an awareness of themselves as part of the dynamic of the wider community, and to allow them to consider and define the nature of its identity.

We believe that an exhibition of photographs of local people, many of whom may be involved in an arts project for the first time, where they look back at their own images on the wall juxtaposed to friends and strangers, is a powerful tool of self-determination for a rapidly changing community.

Backdrop painted by Barry Wilson

The project is funded by the Arts Council, Tate Modern, Lambeth Arts and Lambeth Endowed Charities and has been generously supported by Outback Printworks and Display Graphics.

The images will also form a new collection for Lambeth Archives, another partner organisation for our project, and will be a permanent record of this fast changing community.

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