



### **SHUTTER SPEED: An interview with Dr Pogus Caesar**

Dr Pogus Caesar is a conceptual artist utilising multiple media. He was born in St Kitts, West Indies, and grew up in Birmingham, England.

Caesar began his career as a pointillist painter, later photographing diverse communities worldwide. He has documented prominent figures and historical events such as the Handsworth Riots in 1985, a significant period of social unrest. He often reworks 35mm negatives into new forms, challenging the notion of religion, sex, history and identity from a Black British perspective. Considered an important archive of Black history, Caesar's work has been exhibited widely and his photographs and artworks have been acquired by National Portrait Gallery, Victoria & Albert Museum, Leicester Museum & Art Gallery, Mappin Art Gallery, Wolverhampton Art Gallery, Martin Parr Foundation and Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. In 2018 Caesar was awarded an Honorary Doctorate by Birmingham City University for his outstanding contribution to the visual arts.



**Pogus Caesar. Photograph courtesy of Dee Johnson**

### **How and when did you become interested in photography?**

I have always been interested in photography. Even at a young age I was fascinated by imagery in magazines like Reader's Digest and National Geographic, my father collected them, so I took every opportunity to transport myself to foreign lands. Devouring places I had no connection with fascinated me, the vivid colours and dense black and white photographs started my love affair with the camera. However the real exploration of what the camera could achieve happened in the 1980s in New York. An incident occurred, I was forced to use my holiday camera, a Kodak Instamatic 110. I visited various boroughs including Brooklyn, Queens and the Bronx, photographing anything that caught my eye. I also found a book by the late Diane Arbus, the grainy detail in her work sparked something in me. In 1986 I was approached by the National Museum of Photography Film and Television, Bradford. They asked if I would consider exhibiting "Instamatic Views of New York," then I realised my work had artistic merit even though it was shot on 110 film. Subsequently, the exhibition was also displayed at Midlands Art Centre, Birmingham and The E.M Flint Art Gallery, Walsall.

### **Is there an artist or photographer who inspired you?**

In terms of artists and photographers who have inspired me, so many have provided inspiration and shown me the diverse paths towards creativity. However the work of Gordon Parks, Cartier Bresson, Paul Strand, Leonard Freed and of course Diane Arbus - it's the way they use black and white imagery in order to evoke emotional responses. My real inspiration though comes from listening to music, anything from Jazz, Soul, Roots Reggae and Classical. If the sonics penetrate my mind and propel me into another space, it nourishes a new confidence enabling me to try new forms of artistic expression. You only learn by failing down and getting up, mistakes are important.

### **Are there particular photos which most inspired you?**

The particular photographs that have inspired me, this is a difficult question to answer. I'm constantly discovering work by photographers, we know so little of what exists. Whether amateur or professional there are hidden archives full of wonder waiting to be unearthed.

### **What is the aim of your practice?**

As an artist working in a range of media, the work provides a visual diary, documenting elements of my life. Art has allowed me to realise a position within the modern day sphere of creativity. I am just an individual providing a message from a range of viewpoints.



**Shoe Shine: Caracas, Venezuela 1991 From the series Schwarz Flaneur © Pogus Caesar/OOM Gallery Archive. All Rights Reserved, DACS/Artimage 2020**

**Do you prefer in black and white or colour?**

I prefer to work in black and white, usually with my fixed lens camera set at 400asa. There's something about the grain that attracts me - the combination of texture, blur, shadow and tone is totally addictive. Utilising natural light is also an important factor, my Canon film camera purchased in the 1980s only has a tiny built in flash.



Ah Yu Dat: Jamaica 2008 From the series Schwarz Flaneur © Pogus Caesar/OOM Gallery Archive. All Rights Reserved, DACS/Artimage 2020

**Do you have examples of your work as part of a human rights/social/economic justice campaign/project? What was the impact?**

The examples of work I'm most proud of are the two projects produced in conjunction with Jack Arts, Diabolical, flyingleaps, Your Space Or Mine and OOM Gallery Archive. The first project in 2019 was "Handsworth 1985 Revisited" a collaboration with the poet, author and playwright Benjamin Zephaniah. It was a large scale multi-site billboard intervention on the streets of Birmingham and displayed on 20 sites throughout the city. I had extensively documented the 1985 Handsworth Riots, in 2011 I asked Benjamin if he would consider collaborating on a project. For the next 4 years he would email me the most earnest, profound and eloquent poetry. Our objective was to create an alternative visual language regarding one of the most important events in British post war history. In order to create more impact, it was paramount to place the artwork in areas not directly affected by the riots. Adrian Burnham of flyingleaps commented, "The resulting street display was a hard-hitting social document and evocative reminder of the racial stereotyping and social inequality that still, as we've recently been reminded again, blights the world."



**Handsworth 1985 Revisited: Birmingham, UK 2019 Multi site installation by Pogus Caesar and Benjamin Zephaniah. Photographs courtesy of Kevin Lake Photography**

In 2020 I reacted strongly to the death of George Floyd; yet another Black person wilfully cut down by the hands of the law, emotionally it burnt deeply into my soul! Two artworks supporting the Black Lives Matter campaign were displayed on the streets of Britain, again using large billboards to spread a social and overtly political message. As

artists we should use our visual language in order to stimulate debate. Adrian Burnham comments, "One of Caesar's works currently up in our cities is called Black Skin, White Palm, Same Blood (2008) and shows a huddle of young black women and men standing in the street. The men are in the background, in the foreground a woman is facing away from the camera but holding up her outstretched palm so it becomes the focal point in the centre of the frame. 'Talk to the hand...'. No Justice. No Peace. The second image Just Want To Be Loved (2017) comes from Caesar's series 'Righting the Wrongs' and features a grainy close up portrait of a young black man overwritten with plaintive and provocative phrases: 'revolutionary skin like me', 'dollar a day like me', 'live on the streets like me', 'still wanna be me?'





**Black Lives Matter Campaign: London, UK 2020 Multi site installation by Pogus Caesar. Photographs courtesy of Jack Arts**

### **Which of your own photographs are your favourite?**

My favourite photographs are extremely diverse, most are from the "Schwarz Flaneur" series. They are just ordinary and mundane images of people and situations I've encountered on my world travels. I prefer simplicity, using available light, bearing witness to random moments then opening up the shutter. These experiences can never be repeated. The photograph "Pivot - A Stronger Pull" was taken very early in the morning, the light coming through the window cast the most beautiful unworldly shadows!



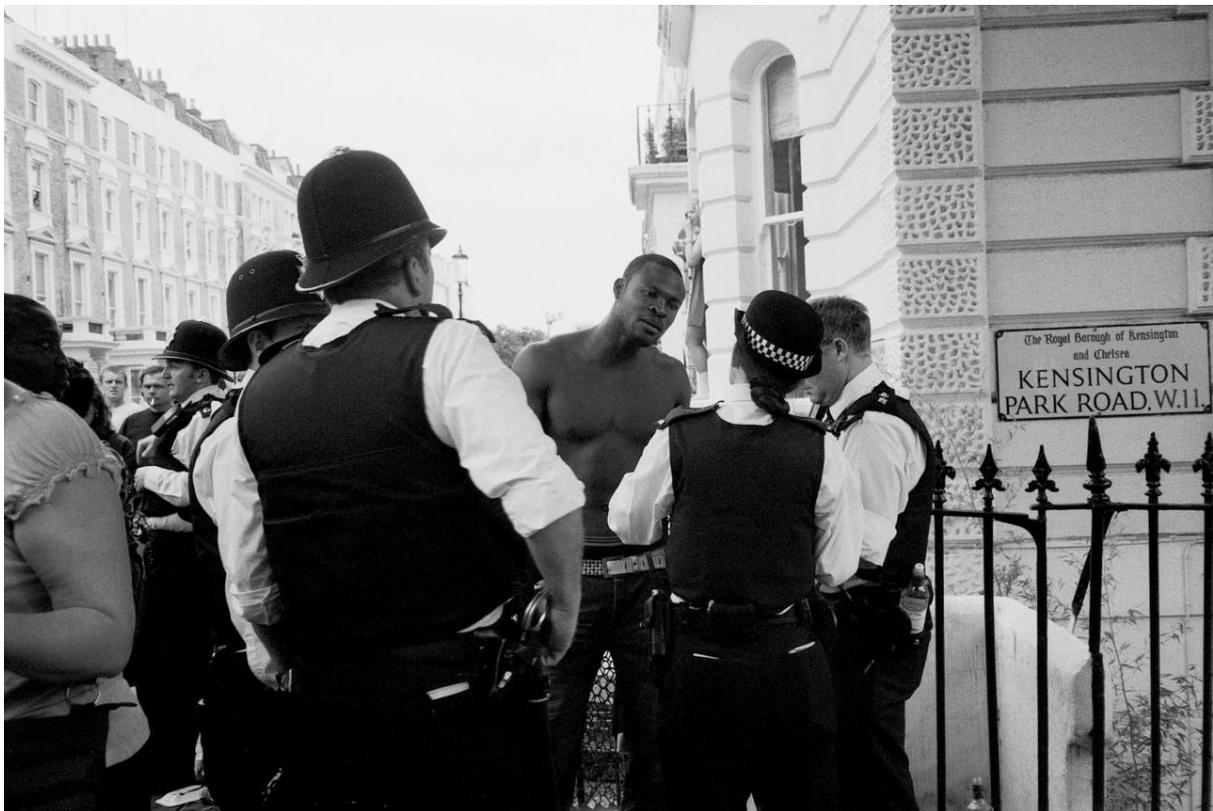
**Pivot - A Stronger Pull: London, UK 1986** From the series *Schwarz Flaneur* © Pogus Caesar/OOM Gallery Archive. All Rights Reserved, DACS/Artimage 2020

**Do we need photographers today, when we can all take and edit our own pictures?**

Photographers today have so much power in their hands. Everyone has a mobile phone so all can lay claim to be a photographer, worldwide distribution is immediate! The important element is documentation. Also there's so much deletion as images are judged within a heartbeat. If digital cameras had been available in the early days, I can't begin to think what I'd have thrown away. Each time I return to the archives and gaze at contact sheets, the magic and rebirth return immediately.

**In your opinion, what is the role of photography in advancing human rights/social justice?**

Photography has a vital role in raising awareness of social justice and human rights. Without the camera there would be less knowledge of what has occurred/occurring throughout the world, so much documentation has been averted from our eyes, hidden, lost or destroyed. A single image can galvanise the world in understanding the situation of others less fortunate. Take a particular incident, the Soweto uprising in 1976, South African schoolboy Hector Pieteron was killed by police during a student protest. A local photographer Sam Nzima took the iconic image of Pieteron being carried by Mbuyisa Makhubo while his sister Antionette Sithole runs beside them. Published worldwide the photograph helped galvanise opinion regarding the plight of Black South Africans under the apartheid regime. Today we all own a smartphone - take photographs, publish them on every platform available as you don't need anyone's permission. Individually or collectively we can then choose which course of action to pursue. There is a narrative behind each image.



**The Wrong Man: London, UK 2008 From the series Schwarz Flaneur © Pogus Caesar/OOM Gallery Archive. All Rights Reserved, DACS/Artimage 2020**



**My House: New York, USA 1999 From the series Schwarz Flaneur © Pogus Caesar/OOM Gallery Archive. All Rights Reserved, DACS/Artimage 2020**