Firstsite

EVEWRIGHT: Libation

8 July –29 October 2023



Firstsite is delighted to announce the first solo exhibition by the acclaimed British artist EVEWRIGHT. *Libation* is a collection of seminal works spanning 20 years, and also includes a major new floor drawing artwork from the front to the back of the Firstsite building.

The show's title refers to the ritual pouring of liquid (usually alcohol-based) to pay homage to deities, ancestors or relatives who have passed away. Offering a libation was part of ancient Egyptian society and remains prominent in traditional Black and African cultures today not only for funerals but as a celebration of life for unions and weddings.

With his major exhibition at Firstsite, EVEWRIGHT seeks to instigate and broaden conversations about what it means to be Black and British in the UK today, via a series of emotionally charged drawings, sculptures, digital films, photography, and recent performance all of which explore themes of migration, identity, race, class and journeys.

Key works on display at the Colchester gallery will include *££Kissi Pennies$$*, a series of sculptures that echo Benin Bronzes and challenge the notion of value, currency, slavery and trade, while also being inspired by modern day migration and the former West African currency known as Kissi Pennies.

Kissi Pennies were originally made from iron rods and were used during the slave trade in West Africa. In addition to being used as currency, the kissi Pennies were associated with spirits of the deceased. In EVEWRIGHT's interpretation, the concept of money, market value, exchange and worth are challenged in relation to the values of human life.

EVEWRIGHT's ££Kissi Pennies$$ are formed from repeated motifs cast in plaster some taken from the ornate handles of traditional-style afro combs, combined with others from 18th and 19th century-style Dutch furniture ornaments and mouldings. These motifs are both highly symbolic.

The decorative pieces taken from items of Dutch furniture make-reference to the Dutch slave trade. Between 1596 and 1829, the Dutch transported about half a million Africans across the Atlantic.

Hair and grooming have always played an important role in African culture; the traditional African comb or pick has assumed a crucial role in the creation, maintenance, and decoration of hair-styles for both men and women. From the 20th century 'afro' combs have taken on a wider political and cultural message, perhaps most notably in the form of the 'black fist' comb. With its reference to the Black Power movement, and its historical links to the re-emergence of the popularity of the wider-toothed hair pick in the USA to serve the Afro hairstyle, the comb has become more than simply representative of an era and a political affiliation. It also symbolises Black pride and identity.

££Kissi Pennies$$ provide a multi-sensory, multi-layered approach that interweaves imagery from an unpalatable past with stories of the present. With the sale of each artwork, a fresh financial transaction takes place - *"the coins with soul"*- meaning an ancestor is set free, with hope, by the artist.

Coinciding with the 75th anniversary of the ship HMT *Empire Windrush* arriving in the UK from the Caribbean in 1948, the exhibition also includes works which explore the resilience, identity, and determination of the people often referred to as the 'Windrush Generation' combined with EVEWRIGHT's reflections on and personal connections with this hugely important nationally significant event.

In 2020, EVEWRIGHT created *Tilbury Bridge Walkway of Memories*, an art and sound installation at the Port of Tilbury in Essex, where the Empire Windrush ship first docked and passengers disembarked to begin a new life in Britain. On the 432 panes of glass in the very walkway they traversed from the ship to the shore, EVEWRIGHT has installed myriad photographs, documents, original boat passenger tickets and other memorabilia. As visitors walked the 55-metre-long bridge they could listen to audio stories about the lives of some of the elders whose images were featured in the installation. Firstsite will have selected pieces from *Tilbury Bridge Walkway of Memories*, including *Motherless Child* - an epic panorama of sounds, images and song. Evoking the intersection of land, water and the movement of people, *Motherless Child* contrasts sweeping views of the gritty industrial coastal landscape of the Thames Estuary with imagery located on the bridge. The film concludes with fellow artist Gary Cordice singing *Motherless Child*.

Another film, *Here I Stand,* relates the personal account of Ionie Richards, a descendant from parents of the Windrush Generation. Surrounded by the images of *Tilbury Bridge Walkways of Memories,* she follows the footsteps of her parents who travelled from the Caribbean to England in the 1950s, a journey filled with hope and expectations. *Here I Stand* explores their personal struggles, loss and achievements, as they attempted to make a new life for themselves and their children.
Other highlights include *Walking Drawings Across the Estuaries*, which consists of two films, *Heavy Horses* and *Coloured People*. Together they commemorate the lives of twenty one Chinese cockle pickers who were tragically drowned at Morecambe Bay in 2004. The film shoot was actually carried out on Silecroft Beach, at Millom in Cumbria.

During the Industrial Revolution, heavy horses were commonly used to haul coal from the nearby mines and today, Cumbrian horses are used for far less arduous work: pony trekking. EVEWRIGHT saw parallels between the plight of the cockle pickers, the horses and his slave ancestors; all exploited in different ways for their labour. Using the beach as his canvas, the artist created markings in the sand, using a rotavator and tractor, to bring the work to life. Horses and riders were then led onto the drawing to walk its various lines. The following day the process was repeated. The public were invited to walk new lines to experience a drawing in an innovative way.

Along with existing work, EVEWRIGHT has been commissioned by Firstsite to produce his first site-specific Walking Drawing artwork that's been specially conceived to respond to the Firstsite building and the layers of archeology beneath. In the foyer and leading all the way through the vast building into the galleries, visitors will encounter a large floor drawing artwork. Black and bronze paint swept across the floor in abstract patterns and marks will guide visitors through the gallery, echoing and exploring the themes of journeys, movement and migration . This will also be filmed

and documented in the exhibition as a work in its own right. This unique new piece will be displayed in situ during the exhibition period for visitors to enjoy.

As he looks to display a body of work that will fill over three of Firstsite's galleries, EVEWRIGHT says:

"This exhibition feels like a homecoming. Firstsite showed Mother's Touch*, one of my works, during Covid which was a difficult time in my life when my mother passed away. Now I am having a conversation with my ancestors recent and distant. In fact, Firstsite is built upon archaeological remains of an original Roman city so I am looking down through history conversing also with the Moors and Roman ancestors.* Libation *is paying homage to all these ancestors. As a descendant of parents from the Windrush generation their influences will continue to resonate in my work, conversations and perception of my place in the world as a Black British Artist".*

Sharing his excitement about *Libation*, Sally Shaw MBE, Firstsite's Director comments:

"*It is a huge honour to present EVEWRIGHT's first public solo show and to host this exhibition during the 75th anniversary of Windrush. We have worked with EVEWRIGHT over the past 5 years on a wide range of projects; and after exhibiting his moving work* Mother's Touch *in our Art for Life exhibition we wanted to provide a much larger platform which immerses us all in his work and the issues and themes he tackles.*

"The artworks in this exhibition are hugely important, raising questions and highlighting issues which are often quickly swept out of sight and forgotten by the mainstream. Here EVEWRIGHT confronts us with imagery, ideas and perspectives which challenge us to question established narratives and examine the hidden and forgotten lived experiences underneath. Whilst difficult subjects are explored, there is also a huge amount of celebration and appreciation of the strength and resolve of past generations, in particular the Windrush generation, creating a powerful mix of emotions. Libation *helps us all to explore individual and collective identities and histories to ultimately discover what unites us, how we can strengthen our connections and the actions we all need to take to make space for everyone to thrive in our society."*

For more information about *Libation* plus other exhibitions, events, talks, classes and more, follow @firstsite on Twitter, @firstsitecolchester on Instagram, like the Firstsite Colchester Facebook page or simply visit firstsite.uk

NOTES FOR EDITORS

EVEWRIGHT, (b.1964), is a British artist who grew up in Lewisham as the child of Jamaican parents from the Windrush generation. He is a multi-disciplinary visual installation artist, who challenges public environments to make spaces for Black British stories to exist and thrive. His work is a conscious 'mash up' of drawing, sculpture, combined with digital film and live installations. He explores the intricate connections between the body and our experience of the modern environment, and communicates this through bold interactive art, also using urban and rural landscapes as his canvas. He creates mirrors where he can see and recognise himself to instigate conversations in the mainstream about what it means to be Black and British in the UK today.

EVEWRIGHT's work includes exhibitions at The Royal Academy of Arts, BFI and Firstsite Gallery, Colchester and a series of site-specific art and sound installations Caribbean Takeaway Takeover held in Lloyds Bank London, Migration Museum London in 2019 and a Caribbean Café in Colchester in 2018. More here: www.evewright.com

Firstsite is a public contemporary art gallery in Colchester, making and showing exceptional art and culture that celebrates the diverse and radical people of East Anglia in order to empower all communities to be creative together and lead healthier and happier lives. In 2021, Firstsite celebrated the 10th anniversary of its spectacular crescent-shaped building, designed by award-winning Uruguayan architect Rafael Viñoly, with a year of celebration projects and commissions – which kicked off with The Great Big Art Exhibition. Over the last twelve years Firstsite has gained a strong, critical reputation, presenting ambitious work to be enjoyed by all in a fun and inclusive environment – culminating in it being named the prestigious 'Art Fund Museum of the Year' in 2021. Firstsite is a partner of Plus Tate, which uses Tate's resources to

contribute to a network of art organisations across the country, and to increase public access. Firstsite's exhibitions are free and open to anyone. Follow us on Twitter & Facebook @firstsite and Instagram @firstsitecolchester and subscribe to our YouTube channel 'Firstsite gallery' **Access information:** We may request sensitivity around timings and the provision of access support such as captions or different interview options for interviewees supplied by Firstsite, please contact us for more information. Please note we believe in and follow the social model of understanding disability and the language we use is aligned with the social model of disability.

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EVEWRIGHT, Libation – Kissi Penny – Sovereign. © EVEWRIGHT

FOR MORE INFORMATION, INTERVIEWS AND IMAGE
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