

Season One, Episode Six: A Review of Theaster Gates' Amalgam by Bella, Margarita, Kevin and Larry Achiampong

Larry [00:00:03] OK. Good morning and welcome to the Mic Drop podcast. My name's Larry Achiampong, I'm an artist. And today we'll be talking a little bit about the Theaster Gates's current solo show at Tate gallery in Liverpool titled Amalgam. And with me joining today, we'll also be talking with Margarita, Kevin and also Bella. So welcome, guys. And yeah, just before we get into talking about the nitty gritty of the show, we come together through two organisations. Many Hands One Heart and also Heart of Glass. So many thanks to those organisations.

[00:00:44] So before we get into discussing the show, I thought I'd kind of like mention a bit of a introduction for people who perhaps haven't seen the show, which I highly personal recommend. The exhibition is created by artist Theaster Gates, who's born in 1973. He's one of the world's most influential artists I personally agree on that as well. Theaster Gates' show, Amalgam explores the complex and interweaving issues of race, territory and equality in the United States. The exhibition takes the history of Malaga as its point of departure during the 19th century, this small island off the coast of Maine in the United States was home to an ethnically mixed community in 1912. On the orders of the of the State Governor Malaga's inhabitants were forcibly removed to the mainland. They were offered no housing, jobs or support. Now, having, you know, made that kind of introduction, I know there's quite a lot going on in the show. And also for yourselves, it's probably, you know, the first time talking about art within this kind of context, even for me, actually, in terms of reviewing the show.

[00:02:05] I guess I wanted to kind of start off on a kind of like point by point basis with each of you individually, what you kind of thought of the show, what you thought of, you know, what you saw or what you experienced. Can I start with you? Margarita.

Margarita [00:02:24] All right. Experiencing...

Larry [00:02:28] So what did you think about what you saw? Did you, was there anything perhaps that kind of really hit you when you when you went into the show or anything that you perhaps took away that had a lasting kind of memory for you?

Margarita [00:02:44] Yeah, the racist was a racist in that, what you call it the thing it used to put on people's face.

Larry [00:02:59] What would you say, is it? What are you talking about, the masks?

Margarita [00:03:03] Yeah, the masks. They used to be a mask on people's face and make their masters slave.

Larry [00:03:10] Right. Yeah, of course. So I think it's it's within some of the earlier rooms on the left as you go into the show. There's also iron brands within the the encased kind of frames. Yeah. What, what what kind of what feelings that they bring up for you when you saw those those artefacts?

Margarita [00:03:42] It's. It's made me cry and it just was make me cry. I was not happy about that. And what the white people used to do to Black people.

Larry [00:03:58] Yeah, I agree with you, Margarita, in that for me, I felt that the show was highly kind of like emotively charged that the thing that I noticed straight off was actually the iron brand. Yeah. Yeah. You know, that that you would likely place on on animals and in that kind of understanding, that relationship or association of of of Africans, of human beings, as animals, as cattle, as as product and kind of being faced, you know, being face to face with that it it really brought up like tremendous kind of feelings for me of anger, but also considering how although, you know, slavery was a transatlantic slave trade was something that happened hundreds of years ago, the legacy of that still kind of is embedded within plenty of societies, especially even Liverpool, Liverpool, which was a, you know, port city itself and how that affects people today. Was there anything else for you that kind of jumped out or, you know, that that you enjoyed or maybe you found perhaps even unsettling?

Margarita [00:05:21] No I was not enjoying it because I was not happy about to see that I was using to our people though. It just make me feel like it's it make this, it made me feel like we like...how you call it.....

Larry [00:05:55] It's okay. Maybe we can take a bit of time and, you know, you can come back to if you know how you felt about that, Kevin is there anything, perhaps for you that that you took away from the show, the experience that you had?

Kevin [00:06:08] Yeah, I that was the first time I heard about Malaga in United States because I thought Malaga was in Spain. Yeah, I guess Málaga in Spain was the first and I noticed a lot of segregation during that period, Black people were forbidden to marry white ladies. There was no interracial marriage then. Yeah, it was it was something that didn't happen during that period. But I saw one thing that intrigued me was I saw a couple in one of the movies that I was watching, a couple, a white guy who married a Black lady. And despite the prohibition, the law, the challenges they were facing, he still stood by his decision to marry a Black lady and they had a family. A lovely family.

Larry [00:07:29] I think you're talking about the Dance of Malaga video installation.

Kevin [00:07:32] Yeah, you're right.

Larry [00:07:33] Yeah, yeah, yeah. And did you, you know, cause I'll be honest, like when I go to see exhibitions, if I find that work is too long, like in terms of video, I kind of duck out for like straight away. I think I stayed for like two loops. But did you did you stay from the beginning to the end? And, you know, why was that if if that was the case for you?

Kevin [00:07:55] I think I yeah I stood from the beginning and that was why I did it, I couldn't leave because I was drawn by it. I wanted to know what was going on and I was I was intrigued and I was interested to know it was really fascinating.

Larry [00:08:21] I mean, one of the things that I took away from the film was the incredible ability to juxtapose sounds and visuals and quotes, both historical and contemporary, whilst also generating original sounds and visuals. So, you know, you have the scenes where Theaster Gates' kind of, I guess, musical group The Monks are playing music, you know, you have one of them that that is singing. And and then all of a sudden that jumped straight into a certain point of history in relation to Malaga or even that of the transatlantic slave trade, which I found to be quite powerful where it went for me when an artist can bring about questions of the past and relate them to what's happening in the now, that that can become like a really interesting kind of soup of ideas, which I think came off pretty

well. Bella, what did you what did you think of the show or is there anything in particular for you that stood out in any kind of way, shape or form?

Bella [00:09:37] Um to be honest, I don't really like to see like the history, especially when it deals with the sufferings of human beings. What I saw particularly that stood out for me was when I saw that metal bar in my mind, I thought it was something that was used to maybe, well, maybe just the, um, what do you call stamp the cattles to show that they they belong to someone. I didn't know that it was used for the human beings. And when I heard that it was used on human beings, I mean, my heart just sank. I mean, I wasn't there at that time. I don't even know how, I couldn't even pretend to feel or know how those people are feeling at that time. But the pain I felt inside, it was just like somebody just took something and just stabbed me in the heart. It is just terrible. And I just don't understand what what would have made human beings to turn against each other, to just treat each other like they are not the same or they are not equal. It was just a sad thing to see and to know that I'm living in Liverpool now. But Liverpool was one of the first ports to for people to be transported to wherever they were going or things to be transported, it's just amazing that, you know, some of these things, you never know that you can someday meet with them.

Larry [00:11:26] Yeah. I think, again, you know, coming back to that, what I felt was important in what that show was able to do was, was to open up conversation around something that I personally feel doesn't get to be spoken about that much of. Or if it does, you know, you have these kind of skewed points of view within, you know, history books or even the curricula. If I think about my own personal history of education, primary school and secondary school, I remember slavery being spoken about as a trade in which all people benefited, you know, and and that certainly was not the case. Kevin, you look like you want to say something.

Kevin [00:12:12] Yeah. What I want to say is that, you know, recently it's like the history of Black people and slave trade has been somehow been eroded or washed away. We don't you don't see it's taught in the schools. You know, but you have like a Holocaust, Wolrd War, all of those things you remember it every year but you don't you don't see the Europeans or Americans, you know, celebrate Black history or slavery, you know, like they do during the Holocaust. Yeah, I think they're trying to erase the memory of Black history from you know...

Larry [00:13:11] Bella?

Bella [00:13:12] I personally, Kevin, would not agree with it to be taught, because just from what happened to me when I went to watch to it, to the cinema, to the art gallery, I it it left me with so much pain. I don't understand if it would be a good thing for people to for young kids to watch that.

Kevin [00:13:39] Is it, it is a good thing for young Black kids to know their history, just like the Jews know the history of Holocaust. Even a million years today, you see, you will be hearing and will see things about Holocaust. The Holocaust was horrible, just like slavery was horrible. So they still keep talking about Holocaust. I think they should teach about slavery, or the slave trade in in schools. So even the young Black children would know their history. Some kids, Black kids, now they don't know don't know much about Black history. They know if you ask them about about slavery some Black heroes, Martin Luther King and others, they don't know who they are. So I think it is it should be taught in in schools so that people know, yes, this this thing really happened just like a world war. I

don't know if you've watched the was the name of the film, is it 1917 and does even telling children this is what happened in this time we fought a war I think they should know.

Larry [00:15:10] I guess one of the things that I find interesting or peculiar about, you know, even discussions regarding the World War is how, again, you know, history is kind of bent in the direction or the favour of that of, you know, the white elite. If you look at the history of, you know, the World Wars you know it, if you dig deep enough those wars were, they were referred to as the colonial wars. You know, various nations, the likes of Germany, the UK, France and so on they they argued about which piece of pie and this pie in which we're talking about is that of the at the African continent would be divided up, you know, even the Germans they did experiments on on Africans before the Holocaust even took place as well. And again, that kind of history, you know, it doesn't really get spoken about. And, you know, you have to kind of dig deep to try and find these things. I guess where I personally stand on it is I do think that it's important that the multitudes and the complexities of history are spoken about or made available, because without understanding history, you know, these these problems repeat themselves. And even looking at the legacy of slavery or even, you know, the psuedo-science related to racism, you know, it's entirely, you know, made up. You know, race doesn't actually exist it's something that white Europeans created for a pseudo science of which we live underneath today, even issues regarding asylum seeking I personally feel that they have a strong relationship and connection to them, coming from, you know, parents who came to this country with no papers whatsoever. You know, you can make those links with those details and so on. And so I think as difficult as those aspects of history they are to take in, I think they're very necessary for people to know about and to also bridge an understanding as to the types of behaviour that we have today, even with regards to like Brexit, for example, which you know whithout getting too deep I think, again, there are connections with all of these things. Margarita, what would you think about that? Any point of what was said that I know I said quite a lot!

Margarita [00:17:44] Yeah, and it did to the history need to teach in school because in our case, our Black kids, they think they are white, they are white now. They think they are white kids now, they don't even appreciate their mothers when they with their white kids, they just behave like the white people, we need to teach the history in school about how the people treat us in nineteen-something.

Larry [00:18:19] So would you say, like, there's a sense of identity that is being lost? So, you know, for young Black kids and kids of colour?

Margarita [00:18:27] Yeah.

Larry [00:18:31] How about the rest of you? What do you think about it?

Kevin [00:18:33] Yeah. Yeah. Slowly Black people, the Asians, the the other other ethnic groups, apart from, you know, the some of them came and they did, not that they came willingly, they were forced to come and fight the war like the Gurkas. Black Africans, Kenyans, Nigerians, you know, those Africans they were taken from their countries to come and fight for Europe but you don't hear, you don't hear them mentioned, you don't hear them celebrated. You know, they only, they only, you know, paint them in paint Black people or Asians in a colour that is degrading. You know, they don't praise them, they don't recognise them for the for what they did, look at what is happening now, the Windrush scandal, something like that, you know these were people that we have brought when they were needed, when they were needed, but they came and gave all they had,

their best, you know and you know worked hard but then they are being treated like a dog, you know, they were not given the, you know, papers to live like a normal British people, which they are. You know, something like that shouldn't happen. You know, you can't bring people to come and help you do something and after helping you, you relegate them to the background and forget about them. They should be celebrated. You know, I think the way they do when they are treating other people who are not English or white it is ridiculous is not something that should be done.

Larry [00:20:44] I think that really resonates for me personally. Anything anybody else has to say before we finish?

Bella [00:20:54] I mean, I I don't know personally what could be done to change this perception of people who who might otherwise think of other people as being less or not worthy. I think both Black people and white people, regardless of what happened in the history, both of us should come together and then agree on one thing and one thing only, that we're both human beings, regardless of whether in the past our ancestors treated each other differently. At this moment, we are living in a different era. And if there's any how to those, that the human being can come together and, you know, know and accept each other as human beings, I think the world can be better.

Larry [00:22:08] Yeah go for it.

Kevin [00:22:10] The world can only be healed when you when you teach people about other people so that they respect other people's culture, other peoples belief if you teach them about other people, they will be able to see those people as human beings. I don't, I believe that if you teach even the white children, if you teach them they are human beings, they have feelings, if you teach them about history, slavery, they will see that this we are, you know, the Black people we are treated without respect, they were treated not well, you know, they, there was inhumane treatment, that were, you know, meted on the Black people. They they will be able to, you know, see Black people you know in this, you know, they put themselves in the same shoe, but when you don't teach them that they will not know what people went through. They will not have the feelings that these people suffered, if I was in their shoe, how will I feel?

Larry [00:23:32] I do wonder. I have to wonder what you know, you know, empathy, connection can actually do. Because, again, if we talk about, here's is the interesting thing right, when when racism is discussed you know, sometimes, white people talk about reverse racism. But the thing is, if you look if you look at the system of racism it was created by white Europeans, it was not created by anybody else. You know, it's a very particular system. Even the use of the likes of the the Bible, which was, you know, placed within places in, you know, the African continent. And that's just that continent alone right, other places as well where people were told that they are inferior because of this particular scripture and so on. So I I certainly agree until until there's a reckoning or even understanding, which I don't think we've even got to, then how how can there even be a point of of of healing. And that's even talking before the, the the issue or the question of, you know, economics, because these various countries, cultures have been wiped off, eradicated and with that, their economies crushed as well, which I would argue has led to so many other problems that we have today where people are impoverished as a result of those histories that have created industry and capitalised upon them through pillaging and so on.

[00:25:09] Really sorry but we can have to cut it there as we're running about over. But I want to thank Bella, Kevin and Margarita for their time. And yeah, you've been listening to the Mic Drop podcast. My name is Larry Achiampong. Thank you very much.