

Chris Day Politely *Shouts*

by Dr. Julie Anne Denton

Once upon a time in the rural middle English cathedral town of Lichfield there lived an unassuming 53-year-old dyslexic plumber named Christopher Day. His mother was Anglo-Irish, and his father—well, he was Black. Chris was born in 1968 in a time when there was a great deal of social unrest. Racist attitudes in the UK, in new and perhaps more subtle or casual forms, still prevail today. Chris grew up with two debilitating stigmas at that time. The first was being Black yet neither one race (Nigerian) nor the other (English), and the second of being born out of wedlock with no memory of his errant father.

Chris Day, Transcending Bondage, 400 cm x 300 cm, blown glass wrapped in copper wire and rope coils. Photo by Simon Bruntnell.



Chris Day's visceral work is about identity, the identity of a race of people, and finding his own shattered identity after years of name calling, racial slurs, and prejudice. His work tells the story of a mass suffering endured. Quintessentially, the artist is a self-confessed storyteller, and he shared that his work is about himself, racism, and trying to engage people in this conversation.

When asked to unravel this statement a little further, he said, "I want to engage society with aspects of racism and the brutality that Black people have been subjected to throughout the centuries all the way from slavery up until the present day. Plus, my work examines my own identity by unraveling the cruelties I have been subjected to from being mixed-race. I think my work is my own therapy. Through telling my stories in glass, I can make more sense of my closer personal situation and deal with the disapproval directed towards me associated with the color of my skin. This negativity also includes an inherent racism even within my own family unit."

Recent Designs Influenced by the Past

Moving on to Chris Day's glass art, he gave me a little background surrounding his most recent works. The first of his taboo bodies of work concern the lawless lynchings of slaves, and later segregated citizens, carried out by mobs. These atrocities were summed up to perfection by the haunting lyrics of Billie Holiday's *Strange Fruit*, which is the title of one of Chris' most powerful pieces of art to date.

Chris Day, Strange Fruit, 300 cm x 250 cm, blown glass sculptures. Photo by Agata Pec.





Chris Day, *Under the Influence*, 400 cm x 220 cm, blown glass wrapped in copper wire and rope coils. Photo by Agata Pec.

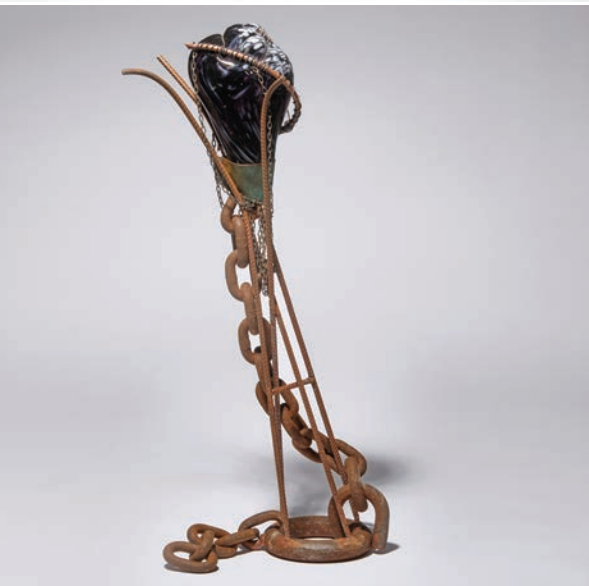
“It’s a sad story, and it just gets sadder and sadder really. It happened during the Civil Rights Movement in America (1954–1968). As I was researching, I came across a photograph of little girls hanging and a mother and father, so they were a family all being lynched at the same time. My work represents that strange and bitter crop of dead fruit. I wanted to make my installation more familiar to people in the twenty-first century, so I made *Strange Fruit* to look like a butcher’s shop window. I didn’t want black, twisted torsos. I wanted the glass to look more like a leg of lamb, a piece of meat, an objectification of once living, loving, laughing, flesh and blood human beings. *Strange Fruit* was born from my emotional response to the research I conducted into lynching and the desire to engage with people and break down that uncomfortable barrier surrounding this dark and prolonged period in history.”

The title of Day’s next body of work, *Under the Influence*, suggests that there must be an alcohol reference, and I asked Chris for clarification. “I was invited to exhibit at Harewood House in the heart of Yorkshire. “This English stately home was built with the ill-gotten gains of Henry Lascelles, who made his fortune from the sugar cane industry and the transatlantic slave trade in the West Indies. Wishing to atone for the sins of their forefathers, the current Harewood heirs are exposing the family history for all to see, and they are shining a light on artists from diverse ethnic backgrounds in their exhibition area. “They invited me to exhibit so that I could confront their now illicit past with my work.”

Recently during an inventory, Harewood found 28 bottles of rum in the wine cellars that were distilled in Barbados at the height of the Lascelles involvement with the sugar trade. This rum was declared the oldest in the world and was sold at auction, with the proceeds being given to charity. “I found this story so interesting that I wanted to produce a series of glass bottles for my exhibition. I wanted my bottles to have a human element that equally referred to the Caribbean rum industry. Furthermore, I wanted to enlighten the viewers and inform them that the slave trade touched all aspects of society. The church, the banks, and the insurers were all ‘under the influence’ that slavery was a good thing. It was like the Bitcoin of the day. Anyone could invest in a third or a half of a slave. Slavery was a money maker, so everyone was doing it!”



Chris Day, *Strange Fruit* installation, 1800 cm x 1000 cm. Photo by Simon Brunnell.



Chris Day at Harewood House examining his glass and wire sculpture, *The Congregation*, 300 cm x 250 cm. Photo by Charlotte Graham.

Amplifying the Story

Chris Day's bursting bottles are bound in copper frames, and the mouths of the bottles are closed with rope. I wondered why Chris has chosen these extra materials for use in his work. "The copper structure represents a cage, and the glass 'body' is trying to break free from its bondage. At that time these pieces were the biggest I had ever produced, some of the bottles being 10 kilograms in weight. This was a huge learning curve, working out how to control such a mass of blown glass.

"Regarding the rope bottle tops, I didn't want beautiful pristinely polished glass openings, because that did not suit the theme of the work. Over weeks, I couldn't find a suitable solution until one day a girl walked past my studio space where all my open rum bottles were getting stacked, and I shouted 'STOP!' I noticed her braided hair, asked her to stand by my bottles, and a lightbulb moment occurred. Perfect!"

If the rope was dyed black, it looked in Chris Day's mind, among its other obviously sinister associations, just like traditional cornrows. Culturally, African braids are worn by rich and poor alike. Historically, they are signifiers for aspects of social identity, and they transcend even gender. The term *cornrow* (or *canerow* in Barbados) hails from the nineteenth century, during which time the majority of Black Americans worked in agriculture and their hair looked like the fields they tilled. It is also a commonly held belief that the term *cornrow* was coined in European imperialist history when the enslaved worked on plantations. Whatever the truth, the ropes complement the message Chris Day's work is whispering to its audience.

"My work is very subjective. It isn't a Black body or a slave tilling the earth. People look at my installations, and they take what they can take from it, read what they want to read. If my viewers just like the colors, they take that away or the copper structure, they take that away. If they delve a little further, then they will take the story away with them, and that is what I hope for." It appears that Chris doesn't want to preach. He simply wants to contribute to the abolition of generationally compounded prejudice, and this includes his personal artistic journey learning to understand himself and his own mixed-race heritage.

(Top to bottom) Chris Day, *Message in a Bottle*, 570 cm x 520 cm x 240 cm, blown glass bottle accented with copper chain and wire mounted on a piece of Welsh slate. Photo by Agata Pec.

Chris Day, *One Size Fits All*, 810 cm x 340 cm x 180 cm, blown glass and copper sculpture. Photo by Agata Pec.

Chris Day, *Minneapolis*, 470 cm x 420 cm x 130 cm, blown glass and copper sculpture mounted on Welsh slate. Photo by Agata Pec.



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Chris working in the studio of Allister Malcolm.
Photo by John Bray.

Self-Referential Work

The next body of Chris' work I am intrigued by is a self-referential work. "A fellow artist in glass asked me if I would like to be known as Chris the artist, Chris the Black glass artist, or ...? I couldn't give him an answer, because I realize that I am still finding myself. My heritage is Nigerian, but I am biracial. I have never been a slave. I have also never been to Jamaica where my father, who is Nigerian by descent, was born, but I must carry this burden including, but not exclusively, name calling in the street, mistrust, and assumption. I am not what they call me, yet I am! Due to the color of my skin, I will never shed the shackles of those negative historical associations and societal judgement, but I am trying to break free. It has made me realize that I, like everyone else, am a mix of so many components, and no one should be boxed into a single category or identity. We are so much more. I am just Chris, trying to produce work about aspects of racism and endeavoring to hold that conversation.

"In terms of choice material, I am using copper self-referentially because of my first trade as a plumbing and heating engineer. During my research it turns out that the manilla, which is a token (bracelet) used for trading slaves, was made with copper (red gold) and sometimes bronze. The metal was mined in Wales, and manillas were produced in Birmingham."

Chris Day's 2020 solo exhibition *Blown Bound and Bold* at Vessel Gallery London. Photo by Agata Pec.



The first European manillas were made in Portugal. In the eighteenth century, trade ships from Europe brought manillas and other manufactured goods to West Africa to exchange for slaves. Manillas, a symbol of slavery, were somewhat ironically an African form of barter that was used for market purchases, bride money, burial currency, and other things. "I was actually given an original manilla by a friend that I had 3-D printed. With the facsimiles, I created a piece of work called *Token Gesture*."

"The materials I use in my work are very important. Obviously, I use rope and wooden boxes originally used for carrying produce. I have even included Welsh slate in my work, because it comes from the same mine that produced the manilla raw material. I have also used chains to reference the manacles and restraints used on slaves. My materials are carefully chosen to complement my themes. As an artist and as a maker, I am still discovering myself. I can produce whatever I choose, and I do not need to fit anybody's narrow interpretation of what I should do or be.

"I didn't plan on being a political artist, but I have stepped up to the plate. I have a seat at the table now, and it is my duty to help facilitate a change in the world. I am not protesting by taking a knee, fist in the air. I am protesting through the art of storytelling to instigate thoughtful conversation while showcasing glass as a medium for artistic expression in the twenty-first century." **G&A**

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Dr. Julie Anne Denton received her doctorate in the combination of sandcast and flame-worked glass for artists from the National Glass Centre, UK. She has learned from and worked with the best flameworking artists in the world including Emilio Santini, Lucio Bubacco, Vittorio Costantini, Gianni Toso, Shane Fero, Loren Stump, and Sally Prasch, to name just a few. She rounded off her education with Bertil Vallien of the renowned Swedish design house Kosta Boda (est. 1742).

Julie settled in Zürich, Switzerland, in 2010. From the center of the city she runs her design firm, www.Atelier315.ch, and www.ZurichGlassSchool.com, her online learning platform for sculptural flameworking skills. She works with a small team beside her who all care deeply about quality education, creativity, and business.

Dr. Julie creates glass and bronze work that resonates beauty, workmanship, and authenticity. Her key themes are people, folklore, nature, and counterculture. She has also received worldwide recognition for her storytelling skills as an artist and her technical skills as a glassmaker.