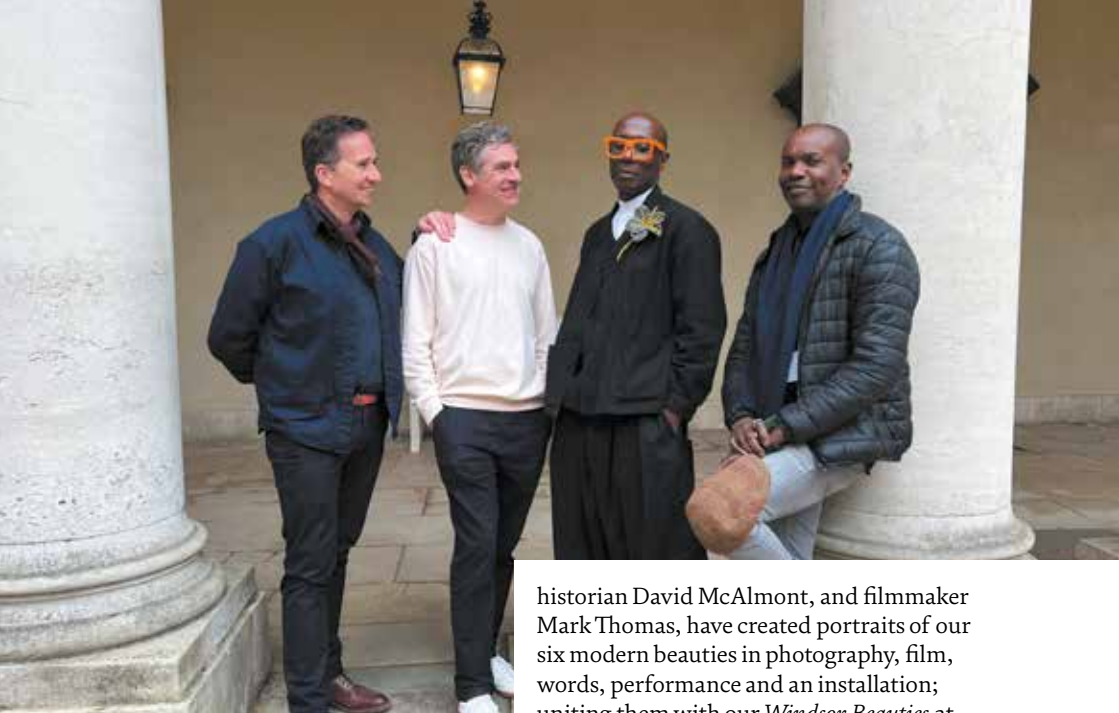


# BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE

Almost 400 years on, Historic Royal Palaces brings you a reimagined interpretation of the collection of portraits by Peter Lely, known as the *Windsor Beauties*. Curator Matthew Storey explains all and hears from the creative team behind this groundbreaking installation: *Permissible Beauty*

Image Behind the scenes of a new installation for Hampton Court Palace.





historian David McAlmont, and filmmaker Mark Thomas, have created portraits of our six modern beauties in photography, film, words, performance and an installation; uniting them with our *Windsor Beauties* at Hampton Court Palace.

In a quiet moment during filming, we asked the creative team and the six sitters what being involved in the *Permissible Beauty* project meant to them...

#### DECADENT ART

Collections curator Brett Dolman explains the history of the *Windsor Beauties*.

This collection has been at Hampton Court since the 1830s when the palace was opened to the general public for the first time. Hundreds of unwanted or out-of-fashion paintings were moved here from the occupied royal residences and covered the walls of the state apartments. To the prudish Victorians, Lely's portraits were, 'a set of kept mistresses, painted, tawdry, showing off their theatrical or meretricious airs and graces, without one trace of real elegance or refinement, or one spark of sentiment to touch the heart'. Decadent art for a dissolute court. With a knowing curatorial wink towards salacious curiosity, the Surveyor, William Seguer, hung them in the King's Bed-Chamber, silent witnesses to the scandalous past of Hampton Court's disreputable former royal residents.

**Above**  
Richard Sandell, Mark Thomas, Robert Taylor and David McAlmont

**Right**  
The King's Staircase provides the perfect location for filming

#### Producer, Richard Sandell:

Research tells us that organisations like Historic Royal Palaces play an increasingly important role in contemporary life, beyond the valuable work they do to look after and provide access to our shared heritage.

The stories that are told about our historic sites help to shape the way we think about the past, present and future. By placing centre stage Black and Queer lives and experiences that have often been overlooked in our national story, our project asks why some forms of beauty are more highly valued than others.

At a time when people's opportunities to express their full selves can seem diminished, projects like *Permissible Beauty* have never felt more important.

#### Portrait photographer, Robert Taylor:

Co-creating *Permissible Beauty* has been a joyful and incredibly satisfying learning process that has invigorated my sense of what it is to be Black British and Queer.

I'm not accustomed to or inclined to collaboration per se, never mind working on a project as ambitious as this,

so I affectionately salute the creative team. The cherished centre of the whole enterprise has been the revelatory experience of working with our six remarkable subjects: Ebony, Le Gateau, Karnage, Lius, Tutu and Winn. I feel privileged to have witnessed their notably various, thoughtful and inspiring takes on the subject of beauty, and the complicated business of finding ways to thrive, as themselves, in a challenging landscape.

#### Performer, songwriter and art historian, David McAlmont:

It is a challenge to specifically identify which elements are more meaningful when it comes to such a complex portraiture exercise. Discovering that only one of our six sitters had visited Hampton Court Palace prior to our efforts, certainly qualified our mission. Having been raised by two women, the love for women – mothers, grandmothers, aunts, nieces – that immerses the project is a major boon. Ultimately, I'm stoked at our freestanding, cinematic declaration of Black, Queer, British fabulousity, as Black, Queer and Fabulous are so often promulgated as the preserve of our







American cousins. The four glorious days that we all gathered at Hampton Court Palace to bring the portraiture to life will never be forgotten. *Permissible Beauty* has evolved into an exceptional chapter in British beauty that has been missing until its making.

### Filmmaker, Mark Thomas:

There's not many film productions – if any – where the whole process is infused with a sense of joy and jubilation. *Permissible Beauty* is all that. I learnt so much, not least from the incredible dialogues between Robert, David and our sitters and the depth of research from Richard and the team. Our Beauties all brought their own ideas, style and grace to the space, opening up new avenues to explore within the corridors and grounds of the palace. From the palace, Matthew, Kerren, Emmanuel and 'Lady Jen of Deptford' (as anointed by Winn) and many others brought knowledge, context and support to ensure we could realise this

collective vision. The project crystallised for me on day one of the shoot when Ebony stepped out into Clock Court, adorned with shimmering wings. An image I'll always treasure and hopefully one of the many beautiful moments that will translate into the hearts and minds of our audience. ■

**Above**  
On location, preparing for the shoot  
**Above inset**  
Winn Austin with Mark Thomas

All images are by Robert Taylor except the one of the four members of the core *Permissible Beauty* creative team which is by Catharine Braithwaite.

### Karnage Kills

'The stories behind places like Hampton Court Palace are still relevant today, just in a different way. The lengths women used to go to to meet beauty standards were just as drastic back then as they are now, just done in a different way. *Permissible Beauty* might shine more of a light on what's wrong with the unrealistic beauty standards we, for some reason, adhere to.'



### Julius Ruben

'It is extremely important for these places of heritage to do whatever they can in their power to find new ways of connecting with the fast-changing world. You have to know the history in order to shape the now and to allow a great conversation about the future. Projects such as *Permissible Beauty* are a great opportunity to allow people like myself to connect with the history that seems not related to us and yet is so relatable.'



**Left**  
Model, actor and dancer, Julius Ruben

**Above**  
Grime artist and rapper, Karnage Kills



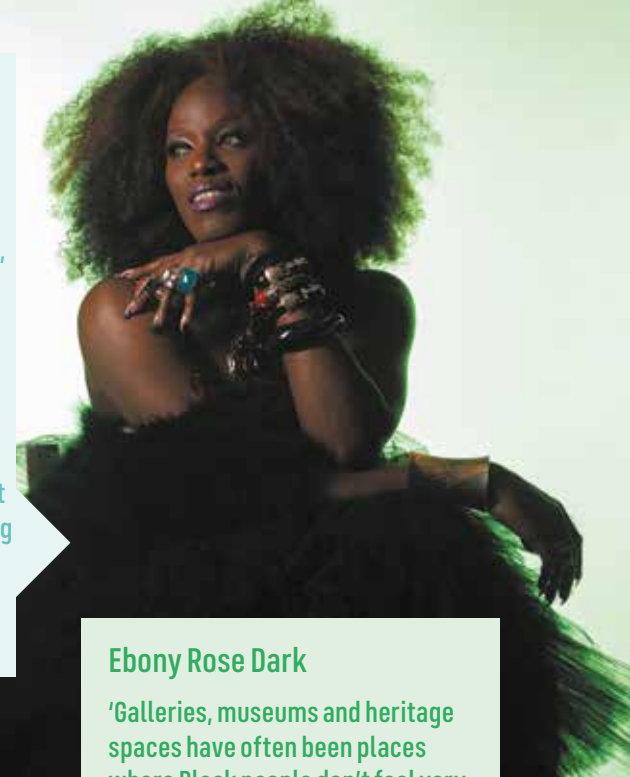
## Le Gateau Chocolat

'The women, whose portraits inspired this piece, were considered beautiful, at the very least, subjectively, by the artist. Objectively speaking, they mightn't be but who are the arbiters of the beauty standard? That the audience may interrogate the context around why the curators of this new piece, *Permissible Beauty*, considered their subjects beautiful might be the source of intense consternation or joyful dinner banter. I don't think there'll be a middling response to the project.'



## Winn Austin

'It's important for history to be able to know and understand that we have been here – we have made contributions in art, fashion, in music, in films, in education and all across the board. I hope this project helps to highlight the fact that Black Queer people are also here and visible enough for youngsters to understand that they are not the first – they stand on very big shoulders and these shoulders have helped to propel us towards the future.'



**Below**  
Cabaret artist  
and dancer,  
Ebony Rose Dark

**Right**  
Model and  
performer,  
Winn Austin

## Ebony Rose Dark

'Galleries, museums and heritage spaces have often been places where Black people don't feel very welcome and can't really relate to what is presented. Also, if they are LGBT+, not being told about LGBT+ history makes these places less relevant. So, projects like *Permissible Beauty* are hugely important to draw people from all communities into these spaces.'

## Son Of A Tutu

'I love all the pageantry and accoutrements of royalty and places like Hampton Court Palace. Also, as a person who cares deeply about the lack of proper representation and exaltation of Black faces in proud British history and culture, it was a chance to be part of a project that played a part in redressing that.'



**Left**  
Drag Queen  
and activist,  
Son Of A Tutu

**Above**  
Cabaret star, Le  
Gateau Chocolat



*Permissible Beauty* is a collaboration between Historic Royal Palaces and the University of Leicester's Research Centre for Museums and Galleries, made possible with generous support from Arts Council England through a National Lottery Project Grant and the Economic and Social Research Council Impact Acceleration Account.

## VISIT

*Permissible Beauty* can be seen at Hampton Court Palace from 14 January to 26 February 2023