

# PERMISSIBLE BEAUTY

## Permissible Beauty EVALUATION & IMPACT September 2023



A project by:



In collaboration with:



Generously supported by:



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## Introduction

**Whose lives are celebrated in our national story and whose are overlooked?**

**Why are some forms of beauty more permissible, more highly valued, than others?**

**How might we start a new chapter of British beauty?**

**Permissible Beauty**, a short film and temporary installation at Hampton Court Palace (January–March 2023) addresses these questions through an interrogation of portraiture, heritage and belonging.

This project responds to the absence of Black Queer visibility in our national story, exploring and celebrating what is unique about British Black and Queer identity.

Shot on location at Hampton Court Palace (Historic Royal Palaces), Petworth House (National Trust) and Kenwood House (English Heritage), the film presents a new chapter of British beauty through the richly layered portraits of six contemporary Black Queer Britons – **Ebony Rose Dark, Son of A Tutu, Karnage Kills, Julius Reuben, Winn Austin and Le Gateau Chocolat** – artists, performers, activists, models and drag queens. The film's atmospheric soundtrack was specially created by **AFRODEUTSCHE**, the British-born Ghanaian-Russian-German composer, DJ and BBC 6Music broadcaster.

Led by the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries at the University of Leicester and based on an original idea by **performer, songwriter and art historian David McAlmont**, Permissible Beauty brings McAlmont together with **photographer Robert Taylor** (National Portrait Gallery and Victoria & Albert collections); film director **Mark Thomas (Soup Collective)**; and researcher, **Professor Richard Sandell**, to create a joyful, bold and celebratory Black and Queer reimagining of Britain's story.

This report brings together data from a range of sources to capture the reach and significance of the project with a focus on audiences and participants.

## Audience and community groups

By centering Black and Queer lived experience in ways seldom seen in heritage organisations, Permissible Beauty set out to create an experience that is:

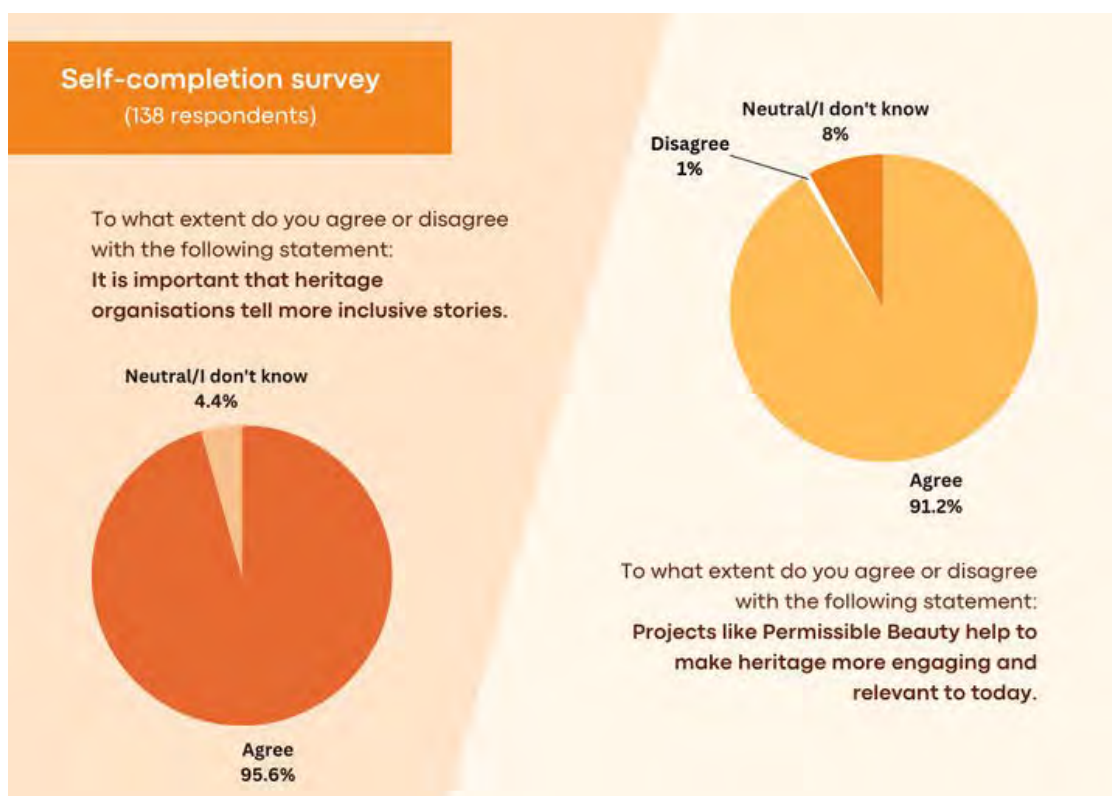
- Affirming for audiences that rarely see themselves reflected in the nation's heritage
- Enriching, stimulating, joyful and surprising for all

Our audience evaluation focuses on these key aims of the project and builds a picture of the main ways in which viewers and visitors responded.

### Self-completion survey

The self-completion survey (completed by 138 respondents) evaluates responses to the project from film, installation and online audiences and generates data from 2 closed questions and an open field to expand on their answers.

1. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: It is important that heritage organisations tell more inclusive stories.
2. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement: Projects like Permissible Beauty help to make heritage more engaging and relevant to today.
3. Please share your responses to Permissible Beauty.

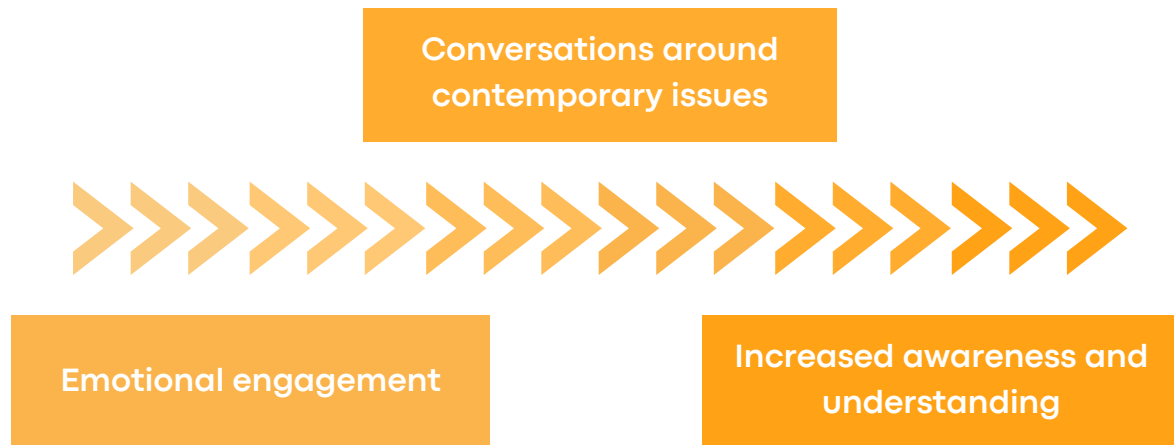


## Visitor Experience, Journey and Impact

Drawing on both the survey and interview data, key themes emerge and these linked responses can be understood as a form of visitor journey. Although, of course, visitors responded in a variety of ways, the data reveals three main modes of engagement and response that are well evidenced in the data:

- **Emotional Engagement** - Visitors tended to engage with Permissible Beauty through emotional responses, reporting strong feelings linked to their experience;
- **Conversations around contemporary issues** – many visitors were prompted by their experience to make connections with (and to discuss) contemporary social issues;
- **Increased awareness, understanding and advocacy for change** - The data shows that, through their emotional engagement and the connections they made (between their experience of Permissible Beauty and contemporary issues), visitors showed increased understanding of the social, political and cultural issues explored in Permissible Beauty. Some were prompted to call for change related to these issues.

## Visitor journey



### THEME 1: Emotional Engagement

Visitors tended to engage with Permissible Beauty through emotional responses, reporting strong feelings linked to their experience;



- I am blown away by the concept, the affirmations, the subjects, the amazing photography and the way it's put together. It is very clever. And most important, the black beauty concept is at Hampton Court Palace, along with the expected portraits of European white beauty...
- It was genuinely very special to see brown skin celebrated in a space like Hampton Court Palace
- Powerful. Emotional. Joyous. Beautiful. This exhibition was the reason I came to visit Hampton Court Palace. It is a critical and creative way to re-examine historical collections and the ways they can speak to diverse audiences today.



## THEME 2: Conversation around contemporary issues

Many visitors were prompted by their experience to make connections with (and to discuss) contemporary social issues from a wide range of viewpoints;



- Our society at the moment is so bogged down in culture wars – and what is permissible and what is not. [...] I think it's good that we challenge ourselves and that these exhibitions do a good part of doing that, especially when you're not expecting to be confronted by them.
- When we see the Royal Family and the problems that they have had recently ... with racism, with people close to the Royal Family and to have something linked between the Royals and the black and the queer... I think it's very good.
- Well, I was brought up long, long before either of you and then we were all brought up to be very proud to be British. You know, you can't keep apologising. [...] It's like the thing in Bristol with Colston... He was a slave trader but he regretted it and did as much as he possibly could to repay.

## THEME 3: Increased awareness, understanding and advocacy for change

The data shows that, through their emotional engagement and the connections they made (between their experience of Permissible Beauty and contemporary issues), visitors showed increased understanding of the social, political and cultural issues explored in Permissible Beauty. Some were prompted to call for change related to these issues;



- It is very interesting to see another perspective of beauty in such a conservative place. It would encourage people to think and open their minds to more different meanings of things than they may have been told or seen.
- I think that exhibitions like this are a good way of calmly explaining that people are people and they should be allowed to be who they are... They should be allowed to celebrate their queerness. That's just as relevant to me as a straight middle-aged white male. My history is their history.
- Excellent project, diversity [and] inclusion need to be portrayed in our society. It's time for change.

## Participants

### LE GATEAU CHOCOLAT



The UK's cultural and political landscape is changing at seismic pace and it is important to memorialise who we are now and who we're yet to become. Many might think that this isn't the history worth preserving and that is precisely why it must be; that marginalised identities may whisper, into the universe, on an eternal loop; "We were here... too."

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.

Black and Queer visibility is important today because the very act of being in a body that happens to be Black and Queer is fiercely political. The quest of parity and luxury of mundanity remains evasive. For now, through art, we may have the microphone to literally speak our lives into existence but dare we hope that our humanity may come first one day. As exhausting as it is, our audacity to dare persists and MUST persist.





## Participants

### JULIUS REUBEN

“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.

I'm hoping our audiences will be inspired. I want them to see themselves in us. I want them to see strength, weaknesses, Beauty and, most of all, freedom of acceptance, freedom of being.

We have been invisible for far too long. If history teaches us anything it is that visibility is important and the narration of my experiences, journey and stories counts for more than I will ever know. Black Queer visibility is extremely important for our wellbeing as it allows the world to hear our stories, our journeys and, most importantly, it lets us know that we are not alone in our traumas, our love and our experiences.



## Participants

### KARNAGE KILLS

I had an amazing experience taking part in this project; filming was a joy and the team was absolutely incredible and accommodating. I agreed to be a part of Permissible Beauty because I wanted to tell a different story and be a part of something with a deeper narrative. It enabled me to talk about something very close to my heart which was exciting for me.

The stories behind places like Hampton Court Palace are still relevant today, just in a different way. The lengths women used to go through 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.

I want viewers and visitors to take away from Permissible Beauty the idea that beauty is whatever you want it to be.

Black and Queer visibility is important today because we exist, whether we are given the space to or not.





## Participants

### 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.

Many heritage spaces focus primarily on White British history and slavery. Finding empowering stories of Black and Queer Britishness can sometimes seem like finding a grain of salt in the snow. Measures that specifically aim to broaden this, play a major role in true equality and social integration and harmony. No British body or identity should be left behind which sadly, has not been the case.

Black and Queer visibility is important because it saves Black Queer lives, facilitates actualisation and improves mental health and wellbeing. It also helps to dispel the fear of the unknown for those who may not have daily interactions with Black Queer people.



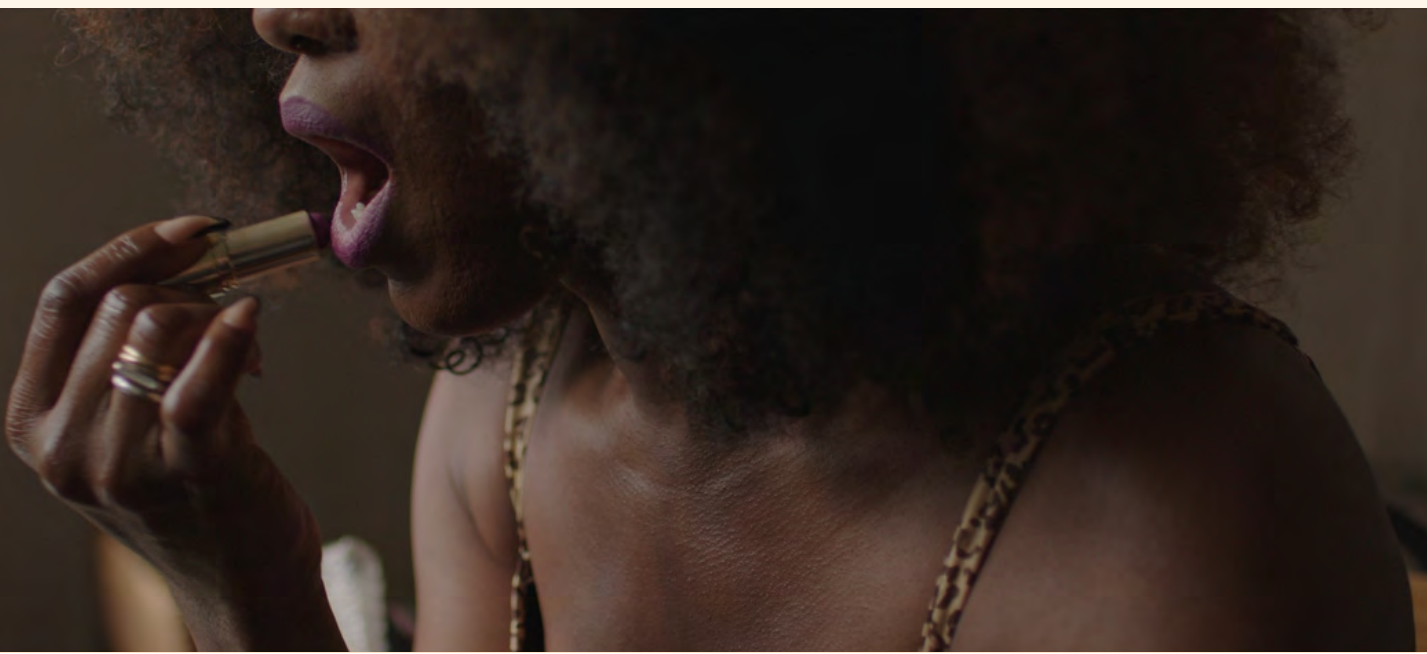
## Participants

### WINN AUSTIN



Black Queer visibility is as important today as it ever was. For the longest time Black and Queer contributions have been sidelined and been made invisible and we have always been overlooked when it comes to the topic of what we have accomplished in the community; the things that we've done.

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.





## Participants

### 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 to yourself. So, projects like Permissible Beauty are hugely important to start to draw people in to these spaces, to open them up to all communities.

I really hope Permissible Beauty reminds Black LGBTQ+ people of their beauty and their worth.

The LGBTQ plus community has a lot of issues around body image masculinity and femininity and so it's really important that both masculinity and femininity are fully celebrated.





## Events at Historic Royal Palaces (Hampton Court Palaces)

- » 2 x Sensory Palaces sessions for people living with dementia/s, their companions and care partners
- » Visit from colleagues from the British Museum community team and LGBTQ+ forum members
- » 339 visitors on Community Access Scheme (CAS) groups who booked to visit HCP during the run
- » 2 x consultation sessions with LGBTQ+ community groups to co-develop resources for CAS partners
- » Community Access Scheme online talk on Zoom for CAS group leaders and members
- » Up close day at HCP for CAS group members, discussion with Son of A Tutu, Robert, Matthew, Jon, lunch and installation visit (55 attendees)
- » Visitor hosts staff training day with Robert Taylor, Richard Sandell and Son of A Tutu





## Sector recognition and feedback

Permissible Beauty elegantly and thoughtfully disrupts the space of the historic house to foreground the agency and creativity of Black British queer subjects. Many museums and galleries have been rushing to speak to the intersectional cultural politics of race and difference, and often, in their haste, they produce work that is cursory and superficial – therefore it was especially gratifying to see something of quality, depth and nuance which commands profound engagement from the audience. The film, the music, the images, and especially Taylor's photographs of the sitters in all their vulnerability, marks a courageous curatorial intervention which I'm sure will have a long-lasting resonance within the sector and beyond for a long time.

**Dr Roshi Naidoo – Museums Association**

The show is a subversive and delightful intervention into the way we understand British history and heritage. It is, as Stuart Hall wrote: 'the production of 'the new' and the transgressive alongside the traditional and the 'preservation of the past'.

**Dr Errol Francis – Culture&**

Permissible Beauty is one of the most significant museum experiences I have had. It succeeds in centering Black voices, bodies, beauty, and strength at a headwater of white supremacy. Its ethereal projections, intimate portraits, fierce performances, and poetic swagger capture your imagination, heart, and head. It is so transcendent, moving, and inspiring that you might just miss how profound a piece of restorative public history it is. It embraces "queer possibility". It confronts and it comforts. It is a marvel.

**Ben Garcia – The American LGBTQ+ Museum**



**Bernard Donoghue – Association of Leading Visitor Attractions (ALVA)**

## Film festivals and screenings

- New Renaissance Film Festival London 2023 – Official Selection
- New Renaissance Film Festival Amsterdam 2023 – Official Selection
- LGBT+ Film Festival Poland 2023
- LGBTQ Unbordered International Film Festival 2022 (Exceptional Merit)
- Black Alphabet Film Festival
- Out on Film: Atlanta's LGBTQ Film Festival – Official Selection
- Wicked Queer: Boston's LGBTQ+ Film Festival
- Cambridge Film Festival
- Queer & Now, Tate Britain: Film screening and discussion
- Wellcome Collection temporary exhibition 'The Cult of Beauty' (opens October 2023)



## Press and media coverage



- Featured in BBC History Magazine (February 2023 issue)
- Website: <https://permissiblebeauty.le.ac.uk/>
- Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/permissiblebeauty/>