

space invaders

Art Lacuna Space presents

space invaders

new art from artists of colour

Curated by Michael Bryan and Zara Lawson

20th - 27th August, 2015

lacuna^{art} | S P A C E

“

What happens when women and racialised minorities take up ‘privileged’ positions which have not been ‘reserved’ for them, for which they are not, in short, the somatic norm.

What are the terms of coexistence?

This is an encounter that causes disruption, necessitates negotiation and invites complicity.

”

- Nirmal Puwar

exhibiting artists:

Alicia Melanie

aliciamelanie.com

Anni Movsisyan

annimov.weebly.com

Marcia X

artistmarciax.com

Zarina Muhammad

zarinamuhammad.tumblr.com

introduction

Welcome to the first ever **space invaders** exhibition, held at Art Lacuna, Battersea, London. The show, curated by Michael Bryan and Zara Lawson brings together four emerging artists of colour*: Alicia Melanie, Anni Movsisyan, Marcia X and Zarina Muhammad in one space.

Why space invaders?

The term space invaders comes from the eponymous book by Nirmal Puwar (Berg, 2003) which describes the feeling of people of colour within spaces of institutional power, a sense of feeling 'alien' to the space, in short a "space invader".

The recent media storm, made over creating 'safe spaces' for students at university to discuss matters that affected people of colour seemed to reinforce the idea that certain bodies are unwanted in that space (with the added need of them being regulated by 'better-fitting' bodies). Combine that with the feeling of many art students of colour that feel out of place within its structure.

But surely as artists the space belongs to us already? Why is there a need to invade a 'space', there are plenty of black artists out there. Isn't it 'racist' to have an exhibition for artists of colour?

Why this exhibition

Before publishing this catalogue I had briefly read an article in this issue's Afterall by curator Eddie Chambers. He has launched a scathing attack on East London-

based gallery International Institute of Visual Arts (Iniva). Iniva was formed in the late 1980s as a response to the emergence of several Black artists, including Dr Keith Piper and Sonia Boyce. Chambers laments Iniva's loss of focus on artists of colour in favour of expanding its remit towards 'internationalism'.

Despite Chambers' criticism, I believe the reason there is an Iniva (and once-related organisation Autograph APB) is because of these early artists gathering together to practice and exhibit, believing in their capacity to be considered serious artists, despite mainstream ignorance.

Why now?

By strange coincidence, the Afterall article was illustrated by a poster advertising an exhibition pioneering group of artists back in 1984 in Sheffield, England, called *Into The Open: New Paintings, Prints And Sculptures By Contemporary Black Artists*. I'm taking this as a divine sign.

Maybe, its time for us as the inheritors of the British Black Art movements of the 1980s take it forward and own the space. We once again invade the space, yet this time, we mold the space, rather than the other way round.

So, if you're reading this, as an artist of colour, my humble request to you is simply this:

Just keep making work.

It is very easy to get side-tracked into heated debates about issues that face us, such as attempting to change the art curriculum etc. and leave the art behind. We are artists; the discussion should fuel the art, not the other way round. We change our world through images, not by the word.

My other challenge to you is also:

Empower yourself.

Blame the institution, like I did, when I was banned for a performance at college, but understand this - there is no institution without us. We shape our institutions, by being here. We are the change.

Michael Bryan / Zara Lawson
Co-curators for space invaders

Notes:

CHAMBERS, E. (2015). Iniva: Everything Crash in *Afterall* no39, Summer 2013.

* the term *person of colour* for our purposes replaces the term "Black British" which includes British-born (or raised) people with South Asian, African or Caribbean heritage.

¹ “*Pluriverse*” is a term I first came across in Ramon Grosfoguel’s article, The Structure of Knowledge in Westernized Universities: Epistemic Racism/Sexism and the Four Genocides/Epistemicides of the Long 16th Century, 2013. Found online at: <http://scholarworks.umb.edu/humanarchitecture/vol11/iss1/8/>

Sandpit

Sandpit is a participatory installation and performance reflecting on my experiences of the conditioning and resisting of certain idea/s within certain institutions, particularly academia. I occupy this space with my voice; hairs that I have long been conditioned to censor; a language that is “foreign” here but familiar in my home; and with a stage made of sand. I recite the first poem I have ever written in my parents’ mother tongue, Armenian (with a translation), whilst standing in a sandbox: one of the earliest institutions we come across and face power dynamics within the pit.

It has taken the continued, enforced labour and theft of uncountable black and brown bodies and indigenous resources during the colonial process, or “modern” period (c. 1492 onwards – from the moment Columbus invaded Indigenous American land) to literally build these institutions that many of us, very much including the descendants of these exploited peoples worldwide – find ourselves unable to fit in safely nor with ease, as our full selves. The foundations upon which these establishments have been created inherently deny the possibility for radically accessible diversity, or **pluriversality**¹.

The performance will take place at the private view. I invite the audience throughout the exhibition to take some sand from the pit, to reflect on how our being is contained and constrained by the structures that discriminate against one, explicitly or implicitly, but to also map how, as an individual or collective, we find the slit edges to temporarily escape the colonial conformity that western institutions bind us into.

Anni Movsisyan



Alicia Melanie
Sa'ka Fete? (How Are You?)
2014
acrylic on canvas

the invisible black woman

Fifteen out of three thousand artworks in the Tate's collection are by Black British artists and only four are by black women.

The statistics ring true.

I often think about my placement, or rather displacement within art institutions as a Black British female artist. This continuous discourse of representation and visibility has been concepts that have been deciphered through my practice.

It is constant because it is my reality.

When I decided to be a practicing artist, I immediately knew that my embodiment was a complexity. My femininity and my blackness equates to neglect. My work therefore comments upon the true privilege of visibility and narratives of institutional critique.

My theory of 'invisibility' (in recent times) speaks from a subjective point of view- thus exploring my notion of the unseen black presence within institutions.

Within this journal series, I visually produce these theories of black bodily representation. The addition of montage is paramount to the focus of features, lingo and beauty.

Additionally the fragility of the paper is also relevant to stereotypical impressions of black womanhood.

Alicia Melanie



Marcia X
One Drop Quantum 6
acrylic on canvas
2013

in racial limbo

My ancestral lineage of African, Taino, Inca & East European blood leaves me in a state of categorical limbo. I am not able to solely belong to a race or nation in a time where people are rallying with their own to fight oppressive systems. It is racial & national limbo. My existence here is due to the grace and fortitude of my ancestors. My blood is mixed and tangled with the roots of colonialism in South America & the Caribbean, and there is no escaping how it affects my relationship to society. Particularly US society, since I was born in Chicago but have deep connections with Puerto Rico, and some with Peru.

As an artist and writer, I use visuals and words to understand the culmination of my existence but also confront the systems and history that have placed me at these intersections. My visual works aim to de-center whiteness and focus on the feelings and emotions of being in the Diaspora, and how one navigates through such an unhomey space, and the lack of autonomy in naming themselves.

My writings and speeches confront white supremacy, particularly in contemporary art institutions and education, and are written in such a way that not only provides students with resources and validation of their truths, but for those not familiar with fine art practice. Intersectional practice within feminism is the theoretical basis for my practice in almost all senses. This allows for the nuances of our lives to have a place in my work.

Marcia X

how to disappear from cyberspace almost completely¹: a wikiHow instructional

Wouldn't it be great if when I buy a coat, it came with a pocket that blocked out all phone signals, 3G, 4G, wifi just fucking everything? So like, when I put my phone in it, it's just completely dead to the world. It's on a forced aeroplane mode. I wonder if they sell that in Urban Outfitters? (if they did, it'd probably be like £280)

In the year 2060, post-earth art will be the next big thing, the current buzz-phrase for 'you need to fucking know about this, it's hot-fucking-shit'. The Gagosian-bot will speak about its meaning and cultural relevance on panel talks conducted by our Google government for the mass education and understanding of the art world (AKA, art.tumblr.com where everyone goes to look at paintings. The 2060 equivalent of a white cube)

WHY'S IT THE **WHITE** CUBE? WHY CAN'T IT BE THE **BROWN** CUBE? ¿WHAT'S THAT ALL ABOUT WHISTLER, U RACIST LIL' FUCK?

\\{Seeing/sight}\\/, this is all dependent on visibility. HOW the FUCK am I meant TO be VISIBLE in AN art WORLD whose MOST famous BROWN artist IS anish KAPOOR?????? ////

Name 10 South Asian Artists, u have 30 seconds. GO.

[if u did manage to do it, come find me and I will actually give u

a cookie. For real hmu **@ZarinaMuhammad** on twitter or **Xx_zazzy_sparkles_xX** on bebo]

[video evidence is necessary, terms and conditions apply
;This website uses cookies, by using this site u r agreeing to our use of cookies!

OK, THANKS FOR THE UPDATE FELICIA]

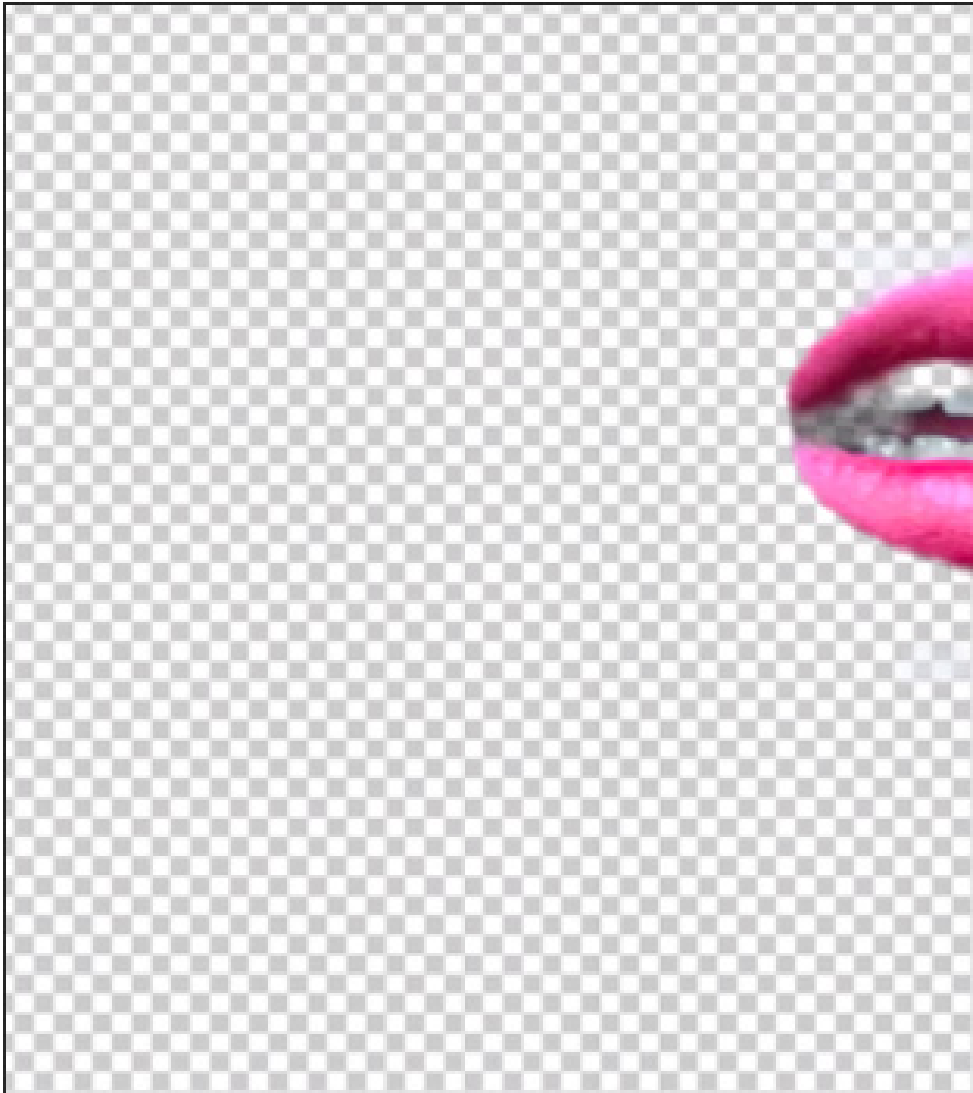
(no shade tho. Anish Kapoor, if u r reading this, I love u don't hate me. I think ur actually great, it's just sad ur the only brown person in the art world that anyone knows but u r important and I even put u in every single GCSE art sketchbook I ever made bc **#represent**)

[EDITOR'S NOTE: insert close up of the lil black girl in Manet's Olympia, like a close up cropped pic of her face, and next to that, more zoomed in and 25% of the size, a close up pic of the white girl's left tit with the nipple in the centre]

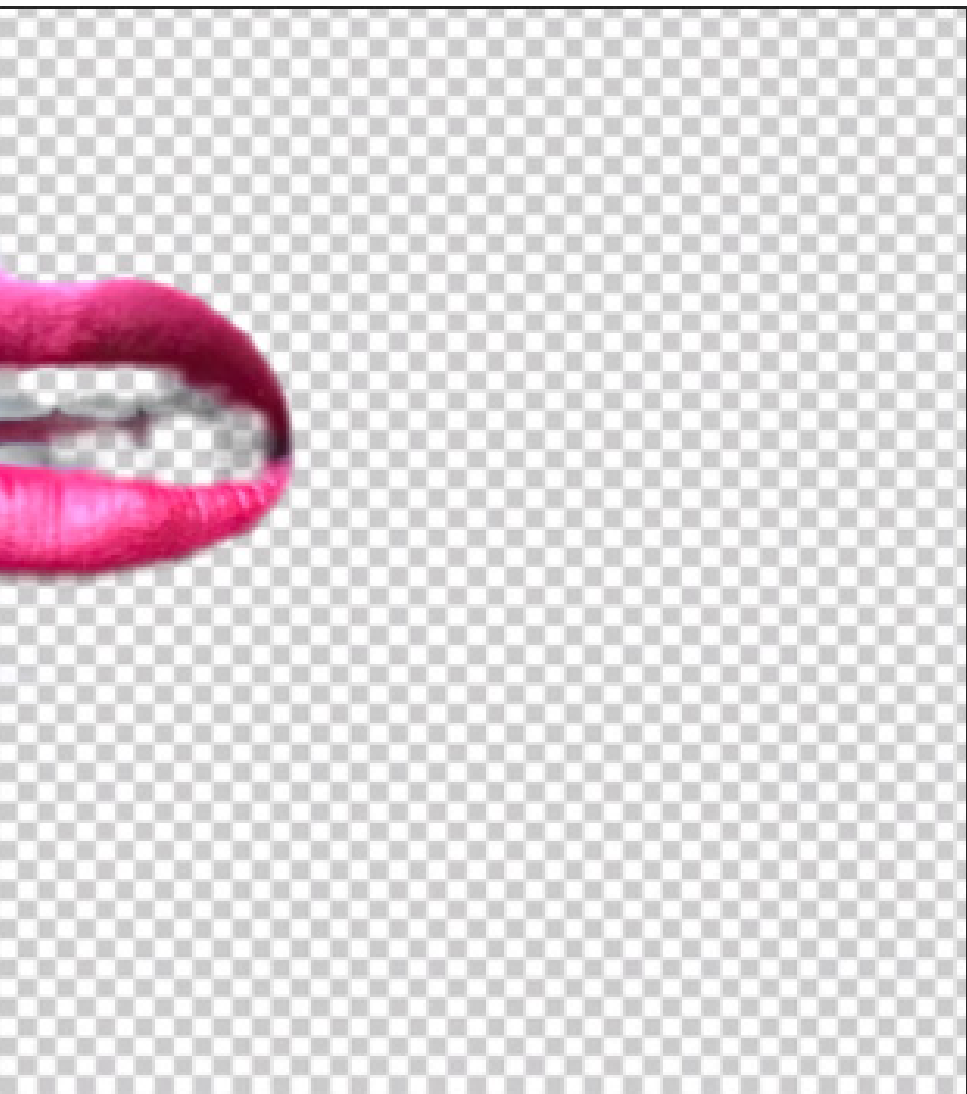
THIS ISN'T ART, THIS IS JUST A SHITPOST THAT'S BEEN PRINTED OUT.

BUT IT'S OK BC IF I MAKE IT TO THE BIG TIME, THEN MAYBE ZAYN MALIK WILL NOTICE ME **#ZQUAD #ZADDY #IWANNASUCKURZICK**

¹ Dettol kills 99.99% of all bacteria, but we can never be entirely sure about that 0.01% that might still be kicking around. They're insidious little fuckers, u know.



Zarina Muhammad
still from film
2015





Zara Lawson
Aooch, that hurts!
2015
Mixed media: card, paper, felt, nails, thread

don't make art!

My experience at a very well known art school had, lets just say, a very lasting impression and not in a good way!

I felt like I was in an unseen battle whilst doing my B.A. (Hons) in Fine Art at the establishment. In short, the art department is not as open-minded as it likes to think it is, definitely not what was promoted by the establishment.

I personally cannot believe I managed to stick out the whole three years. Believe me there were times I just wanted to pack it all in. My inner strength came from the fact as a mature student I had already been through a lot of crap in my life. Equally my friends who were also studying at the same time faced similar issues, they were my pillars of support.

Apart from one or two people there, I felt there was not enough support or encouragement in general in the art school. A cold environment, everybody else carried on as they had always been.

But, it was something about the art school place where I began to question my brown body within this white space, the whiteness became quite overpowering, where as if I was pushed into a corner. Why I felt this I don't know. Even though I had predominantly lived and studied in mainly White environments, which I was comfortable with that, it was never an issue for me. Up until then.

Never before did I feel my race was so apparent to me.

I made it to the end not without obstacles thrown in my way from the art school. I cannot even mention all the nonsense. But, I will

mention one incident that took place on the last day of my degree show as that just took place.

My exhibition questioned misogyny and the patriarchal structure in society. The brutal critique was based on my own personal experiences and people close to me. I wanted to destroy the white walls of the institute and cover them with the message: **I am here and I exist!**

My exhibition had a mixed response. As art is subjective this is understandable. However what it actually showed me that there were some academics that were closed-minded. Maybe they thought they were above this subject and that it somehow takes place somewhere far away in a primitive culture.

The conversation

The incident was when a staff member posed as a 'tutor' claiming to mark my work. I knew I had seen her somewhere but could not recall where at the time. She definitely was **not** a tutor as I knew most of mine in person.

This woman basically came in as, I guess, a "stand-in" for some of her male colleagues to question me about my art, which was fine. But the 20 minute crazy talk was more of a personal attack:

Her: "Are you going to carry on with art?" (as if to imply that I should not)

Me: " Yes."

Her: "You have a lot of shit to deal with taking on subjects of

misogyny and patriarchy!”

Her: “Do you feel responsible for the negativity towards men? How would you feel if the tables where turned?”

Me: “It is not my responsibility to console them, they can do what they want”

She went onto say she had been tricked into the main exhibition space due to the main [inoffensive] image outside the room.

Me: “You did not have to go in, there were visitors who saw the work from outside and did not enter as it wasn’t for them”

Her: “What was it? A failed marriage?”

Me: “Maybe, maybe not!”

Her: “So you must have slept with all the men [on the wall], like Tracey Emin...”

At this point I thought to myself, ‘Tracey Emin made you believe she had slept with all the names mentioned’. If she only had bothered to look at her work in detail...

Had this conversation had been outside it would have been a very different story! However I kept my “kool”, as nothing is more annoying, when you do not respond in the way they want you to!

the enemy within

When I set out to create **space invaders** as an exhibition back in April this year, I wanted to correct a wrong that seemed to be prevailing at the moment in arts education, the marginalization of minority expression. During my time in art school I felt my own development stunted due to having a performance banned. I had written an article about this in **QUIET! Magazine** and given a talk at Iniva, and felt an accord with those who resonated with my experience. A few things have happened since, that made me doubt whether an exhibition of this type, where artists of colour are validated by their peers, was the right way of responding to the negation by the art institution.

Firstly, co-curator and artist Zara Lawson was taken to task for her final degree show piece in June 2015, a room of white walls covered in stick men engaging in violent acts towards women. A member of college staff, pretending to be a tutor cornered and verbally attacked her, bringing criticism of her work towards her, throwing around unfounded accusations about her personal life.

Secondly, in the early stages of planning this exhibition and touting potential venues, I was told by several connected people that the idea wasn't viable. I was met with a desperately lukewarm reception, with remarks such as 'it's a vanity project', 'only our mates would turn up to see it', 'it's just an opportunity to get drunk'.

Then it struck me - we were being met with force by those with a stake in the institutions and weren't necessarily fighting in

our corner. In fact they had something to lose by examining the current structure. What made it all the more galling was that they were, like us, people of colour. They were, supposedly, one of us, yet were against our ideas, and being quite disrespectful and patronising with it too. It's a tough lesson to learn that other people of colour can and will actively sabotage and disrupt their fellow artists' progressions adding to the 'otherisation' of our creations.

Of course, the other side of that coin is becoming the face of 'diversity', knowing you are only there to soothe the institution's conscience. Its a symbiotic relationship that seeks to maintain itself even in the face of others exposing that relationship.

Maybe its not their fault, in 'trying to be an insider', BAME employees have had to learn the language of the institution in order to survive within it (with the remuneration that comes with it). Speaking for the institution is easy when they pay your wages, and is a constraint that affects bame employees (with employment rates being significantly lower than the median).

Maybe it's my own drive to be accepted: Why am I looking for validation from the institution? To be endorsed by those in the 'know'? Either way it hasn't happened – my own work is being exhibited simultaneously in two places outside the art institution.

Making it a reality

With that in mind I still believe the four exhibiting artists I've chosen are sensitive to the cause, collectively and most importantly through their individual practices. They too have experienced hostility and/or isolation for their own positions on identity within the institution. What I'm most impressed by are the methods used in creating that breathing space within their practices, and the range of media used, whether it is by digital media, paintings, performances or by the spoken word.

I hope our experiences can be seen as a impetus to turn it round and create something positive in compensation, that it is worth something to be an artist of colour. This exhibition is an experiment in rectifying this feeling and hopefully give inspiration to those wanting to go down the art career path, a difficult but rewarding path.

Michael Bryan

Citations:

BRYAN, Michael. **We Keep Our Enemies Stressed: Banned by the art college** in QUIET! Magazine. London, Press Print Oxford, 2013.

artists

ALICIA MELANIE is a research based visual artist. The core of her practice revolves around responding to the evolution of portraiture in a variety of visual structures. Alicia Melanie comments upon the discourses of authority, hierarchy and both current and historical societal happenings.

Whilst painting has become a fundamental responsibility, she also practices with new-media art forms to expand on the ethos of the artworlds engagement with new technologies.

She is part of collective **sorryyoufeeluncomfortable** and has shown work at **Watch This Space**, Beaconsfield Contemporary Art (2015) **Factory 15**, Old Turman Brewery (2015) and at Iniva (2014)

ANNI MOVSISYAN is a London-based performance artist, social activist and part of collective **sorryyoufeeluncomfortable**. Her practice generally focuses on questions surrounding the subjects of identity, social conventions and their relationship to consumer culture and western society in particular.

Personal experiences regarding culture and identity, and satirical humour, have led her to examine both her own and other people's unique experiences with culture, as a tool to critique the power of dominant cultural structures.

Anni has shown work at Iniva (2014), For Now at Ambika P3, London (2014), and Live Art Development Agency's DIY 13 (2013).

She has also devised the workshop Decolonising Education as part of **sorryyoufeeluncomfortable**.

MARCIA X is a Norwich-based visual artist, social activist and slam poet. She is currently editor of online platform African & AfroDiasporan Art Talks (aadat!).

For her, the personal has always been in bed with the political. Questions and challenges arise from living in the Diaspora, and one's life has the capacity to canonize the art work from the mixture of personal and politics. Her everyday practice as a product of this world, is to recognize myself for what she is, not what she has been ushered into believing about herself. And what she is, is an unapologetic brown woman.

Marcia's work has been displayed as part of: **Identity/Memory** at Frameless Gallery, London (2015), **AACDD**, Bargehouse Festival, London (2014), with solo shows at Norwich University of the Arts (2013, 2014). She has given talks at Iniva, London (2014) and Sibéal Network, Dublin (2014)

ZARINA MUHAMMAD is a film and performance artist based in London and part of collective **sorryoufeeluncomfortable**. Zarina examines the digital by means of creating a digital avatar of herself as a insert disrupting the prominently Western digital landscape. She utilises a wide variety of ready-made images of the diaspora, to simultaneously affirm and challenge the hegemony of the digital space.

Examining the post-colonial in the digital realm, Zarina uses film, blogs, social media and the internet as a means of self-discovery and self-definition, playing with the themes of visibility and invisibility as her online, ethnic self is subjected to the Western gaze of invisible viewers/consumers.

Zarina has been shown at Latitude Festival 2014, as part of **Cultural Bonds** at Variant Space, London (2015), Iniva (2014) and **Filia** at Space Station Sixty Five (2013). She has also been published by magazines **OOMK**, **Coalition**, **Motherlands** and **Polyester Zine**.

curators

MICHAEL BRYAN is a London based artist and writer. His practice primarily centres on painting, photography and performance. His paintings capture the tension and uncertainty of contemporary society on young people, framed in an allegorical context. His performances and photography work are encompassed by the confrontation between his own in/visible Black body and his audience. Michael has given presentations, talks and has had articles published, concerning the challenges and responsibilities facing today's artists of BAME backgrounds in the UK and beyond.

His paintings will be on display at Float Art London and as part of the Clyde and Co Art Award, both in Autumn 2015. Michael completed a BA in Fine Art Drawing from Camberwell College of Arts, and is a recipient of the Postgraduate Scholarship from University of the Arts London to undertake a Masters in Fine Art at Central Saint Martins.

ZARA LAWSON is a multi-disciplinary artist based in London.

Her practice is informed by the structural inequalities of South Asian and Indian society which centre on gender and the caste system, as spoken by authors Arundhati Roy and Gayatri Spivak. She is known for her multi-faceted approach to her practice by employing large-scale wall drawings, photography, site-specific installations and live performance.

She has recently exhibited at the Menier Gallery, London Bridge and is creative director of borderless magazine (launching 2016). She completed her BA (Hons) in Fine Art from Goldsmiths College, University of London.

acknowledgments

My thanks goes to the participating artists who made space invaders a success: Anni Movsisyan, Marcia X, Alicia Melanie and Zarina Muhammad. They had the faith to say yes to an entirely new project. Collectively and individually they already have the determination and talent to go as far as they wish as practicing artists and agents for social change. Thank you all.

I would also like to thank Chris Cawkwell and Art Lacuna for saying yes to hosting this exhibition. His professionalism and his openness for this project and exhibition has been invaluable. We have worked with Art Lacuna before for the QUIET! magazine's Home Issue in February 2015 with Olga Hendel and found it a great space for emerging artists to display work.

My thanks also go to Nirmal Puwar for providing the inspiration for the exhibition through her eponymous book *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies out of Place* (Berg, 2003). By writing the book, our experiences of social isolation through institutions became that more real for us.

And lastly, my sincere thanks goes to co-curator and dear friend Zara Lawson, who was the inspiration for the exhibition. Her clear-mindedness and no-nonsense attitude has helped her through very difficult situations with grace and ease. Thanks bobblehead!

credits

Original text: Michael Bryan
with contributions from Zara Lawson, Alicia Melanie, Anni
Movsisyan, Marcia X and Zarina Muhammad.

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