

**HIDDEN PRESENCE / REFLECTIONS TEXT # 1** by Dr Shawn Sobers, University of the West of England, Bristol

**Reflections on this image**



This image was made by a young person from a school in Chepstow as part of the Hidden Presence project with artist facilitator Eva Sajovic. The project used the life of former enslaved African Nathaniel Wells as the starting point for exploring place and identity in challenging ways. I don't know the name of the young artist or what conversations were going on when they made it, or if there were any visual references they had in mind when it was created. It immediately reminded me of anthropological photography from the late 19<sup>th</sup> early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and their brutal forensic approach to portrait photography, the whole purpose of which was the "scientific" specimen analysis of human types. The montage effect of this image however gives it a much more contemporary feel, a composite that visually argues against the fallacy of the scientific conceit of using photography to further a racist ideology. This montage portrait is unapologetically modern,

a blend of ethnicities, cultures, references, and it could be described as (dare I say it) a post-racial representation. The fragmentary style and blank gaps speaks of how human beings are more complex than we allow ourselves and others to be. Beneath our surface skin we are a mass of cultural contradictions, influences and even DNA.

Is this image the artist's representation of Nathaniel Wells (a man with no lasting portrait in existence), or is it a more generalised portrait of us all? We can see that the eyes and possibly neck are from an African heritage person, and the hair, ears and mouth possibly being European. The game of identifying the ethnic patch may be a futile exercise, but the whole point of entering that dialogue in relation to the Nathaniel Wells story is partly the point of the whole enterprise – who are we anyway? What makes us the people we think we are?

One of the beauties of doing projects in schools is seeing that many of the art works produced by the young people can be continuations of conversations that began with other more established artists that came before them, without the young people even being aware they are entering a wider dialogue. Art becoming an entry point into a broader set of considerations, negotiations and ideas that allows the young people to think beyond their immediate set of personal concerns, even if only for the duration of making the art work.

For example, see how the above image by the young artist from South Wales, relates to the work of African American artist Romare Bearden, and Kenyan born artist Wangechi Mutu, (see below).



Flights and Fantasy, 1970, Romare Bearden



Adult Female Sexual Organs  
2005  
Wangechi Mutu

Romare Bearden (whose entire career, spanning more than 50 years, explored different aspects of African American culture) was so light in complexion that he was offered opportunities on condition that he 'passed for white', though he refused. The above image '*Flights of Fantasy*' is a composite body made up different fragments of ethnicities, the face however containing no detail, but unmistakable in its ethnic depiction, the face being the primary carrier and signifier of ethnic identity.

You are always on my mind  
2007  
Wangechi Mutu



Wangechi Mutu's images are similarly a collation of pieces to make up a whole. In *'Adult Female Sexual Organs'*, the base of an illustration of a woman's reproductive organs are built upon with parcel tape and magazine cut-outs to create the face of a Black woman with the archetypal Caucasian beauty on her mind. The image *'You are always on my mind'* also carries the weight of social concerns on the body of the Black female, including the figure of a street beggar, in contrast with elegant jewelled white hand, precious beads, and the carcass of an animal. Mutu says of her work, *"Females carry the marks, language and nuances of their culture more than the male. Anything that is desired or despised is always placed on the female body."* The montage face communicates an idea then, that individuals are not divorced from their (our) surroundings or situations, and become a part, not apart, of who we are.

The image then of Nathaniel Wells (or not) above, is similar. It challenges us with the question, what does it matter what the man looked like, when all we really know are the surroundings and situations he lived in. Nathaniel's life was a mass of contradictions and that is what we are faced with. This portrait is no less true than a photograph of the man himself. We would not be able to reach into a photograph of Nathaniel to see the inner workings of his brain or see his dreams and fears. That is the same for any portrait. I have never believed the conceit that we can tell anything of the character of a person through a portrait photograph, with the eyes being the 'window to the soul'. Portrait photographs are records of what that person was doing at that captured moment in time, not a second before, and not a second afterwards.

In an age where all of the world's information is at our fingertips, it is humbling to know that we will never know some things. As fascinating a character that Nathaniel Wells is, we will never know what his face looked like or truly understand his motivations. He was a contradiction, as we all are, and this image reminds us of that, whether we choose to like it or not.

-----



