

## IT'S A BIT MUCH

**“How can and why should such pathetic pieces of should police detritus impact so much on the life of one of my family members?”**

Barbara Walker

In 1986 a group of London-based filmmakers, the Black Audio Film Collective, made what proved to be a seminal film that examined the broad historical background and the aftermath, of the “riots” that had flared up in inner city Birmingham in September of the previous year. The rioting – apparently triggered by community discontentment and sparked by an altercation between police officers and members of the public - rocked not just Birmingham itself but also London’s political establishment. The film, *Handsworth Songs*, is an engaging document that consists, in part at least, of an overlapping series of archival images and contemporary footage of the streets of Handsworth and the surrounding neighbourhoods. One of the most disturbing aspects of this contemporary footage is the way in which areas such as Handsworth are shown as being, in effect, territory which is occupied by the police, as much as it is occupied by regular people going about their normal day to day activities. This sense of Handsworth and surrounding areas being virtually under siege by the police is reinforced, time and time again, by newsreel and by the recounted experiences and opinions of aggrieved and frustrated residents. Within *Handsworth Songs* we hear from a variety of Black Brummies who are sick and tired of being perceived as drug peddlers and other criminals, and who resent the intrusive, disruptive and aggressive policing that they feel targets them.

Along with surveillance and generally *intimidating*, almost militaristic police presence, the principle tactic of this policing so residents complained, was the widespread and enthusiastic use of *stop and search*. In the period leading up to the disturbances of September 1985, hundreds of Black youth were subject to summery stop and search, whilst going about their legitimate business. In one of many of *Handsworth Song's* particularly sobering passages, one noticeably aggrieved women, employing poignant understatement, describes and condemns such police tactics as being “a bit much”.

Two decades later, the intrusive and corrosive effects of stop and search are still being felt, in Birmingham and elsewhere in the country. In 2006, Black youth, many of whom were born in the 1970s and 1990s find themselves, in effect, harassed by a similar new generation of police officers. Behind each stop and search statistic there lies an individual human being who has, for whatever reason, been targeted as *someone of interest* to whichever police officers or patrol car that happens to be passing. Stop and search is in effect racial profiling by same name. These stopped individuals, these luckless pedestrians, tend to be of certain ethnic background

(African Caribbean), tend to be of a certain gender (male) and tend to be of a certain group (young). Beyond that, a range of equally subjective and often bizarre variables is employed by the police, in their decisions to target a given individual and mess up their day

Enter Barbara Walker, who has for this exhibition produced a body of work that unflinchingly and intelligently explores the impact that stop and search has had, and continues to have, on her son, Solomon, as well as on herself as a mother. Barbara is one of the most talented, productive and committed artists of her generation and over the course of the past few years she has established and distinguished herself as an important chronicler of the lives of her family and her community in and around her native Birmingham. Her work – painting and drawing – is marked by its profound empathy for its subject matter as much as its distinctive style. There is, within her pictures, great honesty, an honesty that speaks of (as well as to) the human condition in many of its forms. Like the great African American artist Charles White, Barbara's pictures are "images of dignity" and because her work is highly figurative, we all have an uncommon access to its multiple and pronounced social narratives.

'Louder Than Words' consists of a series of deeply arresting (no pun intended) drawings that directly address the personal, social and political implications of the police obsession with stopping and searching those hapless young Black men deemed to be suspicious in appearance or behaviour. As a parent, an artist, and a life-long resident of Britain's second city, Barbara has used her formidable drawing ability to explore the impact of stop and search on her son Solomon who has, on a number of occasions been stopped by the police, questioned and searched. To this unwarranted act of intrusion and aggression was added the curiously modern and thoroughly bizarre act of being issued with a record of the stop and search. It is now apparently required by law that at the end of a stop and search encounter the time waster presents the one whose time is being comprehensively wasted with a duplicate carbon copy of an official form relating to the stop and search. For Barbara (perhaps even more so than Solomon) these small, almost unassuming and sometimes barely legible pieces of crumpled paper took on a sinister life of their own. Humiliation and intrusiveness reduced to obligatory rituals of bureaucratic form filling and box ticking. It's difficult to know just what those stopped and searched are supposed to do with these souvenirs. Curious about these incidents affecting and involving her son, Barbara began to collect these carbon copies issued to Solomon. As an artist whose practice has, for some years now, sought to document the lives of Birmingham's Black communities, Barbara wanted to find ways in which she could address, within her artistic practice, what was happening to her son on the streets of his home city.

Perhaps more than anything, 'Louder Than Words' gives us a chance to consider this question: given that Solomon has, apparently, while going about his

lawful or leisure, given the police 'suspicions' and given that these 'suspicions' have led to him being stopped and searched on a number of occasions, what are the consequences and the implications of being a young black male in British society today? Furthermore, what on God's earth informs this curious negative stereotype that insists that young Black men are somehow perpetually 'suspicious' and worthy of police scrutiny? What is that apparently makes them such a threat to society or community? Just what is it that makes the police so convinced that young Black males such as Solomon must have either criminal intent or criminal experience (or both)?

The "special fear" mentioned earlier alludes, in the instance, to the worry that after years of baseless police suspicions, Solomon might simply have had enough and *resist* questioning and *resist* being searched. There are after all many many mothers grieving for sons who have died in what are euphemistically referred to as "suspicious circumstances" involving police officers. It is often after being handcuffed that an innocent detainee's day can go from bad to worse. Commenting on one man's fatal encounter with the police, Tom Robinson wisely cautioned that "If you figure on stayin' alive, button your lip and just swallow your pride/ and don't make trouble when your hands are tied..." Barbara's other fear may well be that sooner or later, the police will come looking for Solomon simply because his stop and search details have been entered, one too many times, into some or other police computer, even though no criminality whatsoever, on Solomon's part has taken place.

The crumpled yellow bits of paper given to him at the end of his encounters with the police symbolise these questions, these concerns, fears, and worries. Likewise of course, the crumpled yellow bits of paper have in their own ways come to reflect and represent Solomon's own frustration, displeasure and above all fear. Barbara takes as her starting point for this work these crumpled bits of paper. She has had them digitally enlarged and used them as a base on which to execute drawings of Solomon and painting of street scenes depicting the neighbourhood in which he lives. The very same neighbourhood in which he is stopped and searched. These painting by Barbara are particularly powerful, as through the device of depicting pleasant street scene, she reveals her home neighbourhood not to be an environment of comfort, safety and domesticity, but an environment in which there lurks a terror that might, quite literally, descend at any given moment. Within this work, Barbara reminds us that our homes might offer little safety or shelter from the perils of the police attention on the street. Just ask Cynthia Jarrett or Cherry Groce.

Other work within this new series consist of sensitive drawings of Solomon himself. These compositions capture his image, his facial features and expression, his identity, and his personality. The intention of this work, in part at least, is to raise the question "what does one who is seen as a danger to society look like?" Or to put it another way, how can Barbara's beloved, law-abiding son be seen as a treat to

the civil order time and time again? This series of drawings of drawings prompt this further enquiry: what are the consequences and implications of living in a world in which and individual such as Solomon is often judged by other (particularly those with power and in power) by the way they look, rather than by what or who they actually are.

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\* On Saturday 28 September 1985, Cherry Groce, a Black women was shot and paralysed during a police raid on her home in London. Cherry Groce was allegedly, shot in bed by a member of a team of armed police officers who were looking for her son. Another slightly divergent account has it "a team of armed officers went to the home of Mrs Cherry Groce in Brixton Brixton, South London to arrest her son, Michael who was wanted for [allegations of] armed robbery. Infact, Michael Groce no longer lived there. The officers smashed down the doors with sledge - hammer and then an inspector rushing in shouting 'armed police '. Mrs Groce says the officer suddenly rushed at her, pointing a gun at her. She tried to run back but he shot her. She is now paralysed and confined to wheelchair." (The Times, 16 January 1987)". Quoted in *Policing against Black People*, (London, Institute of Race Relations, 1987), p.26

On Sunday 6 October 1985, just over a week after Cherry Grose sustained her horrific injuries , another Black women, Cynthia Jarret died of a heart attack during a police raid on her Tottenham home. Again, she was not the direct focus of the police attention. Reports of Cherry Grace's injuries and Cynthia Jarret's death sparked widespread rioting throughout the Brixton area of south London and the Tottenham area of north London respectively.

These incidents figured prominently in *Handsworth Songs*. For more on the incidents and responses to them see 'Riots and Rumours of Riots'. a chapter in '*A Climate of Fear' The Murder of PC Blakelock and the Case of the Tottenham Three*, by David Rose, Bloomsburg Publishing Ltd. 1992 and 'Roll Call of Death', a chapter in '*Deadly Silence' Black Deaths in Police Custody*, (London, Institute of Race Relations, 1991)