



Manifestin' Joy

The Skinny meets **Christian Noelle Charles** to discuss her current exhibition *WHAT A FEELING! | ACT I* at Edinburgh Printmakers

Words: Shalmali Shetty & Harvey Dimond

“This is CC TIME from the 315 to the 212, here in the +44 giving it to you hard...” A breezy radio slogan invites you into the vivid world of Glasgow-based printmaker and performer Christian Noelle Charles (also known as CC). For her second solo presentation in Scotland, titled *WHAT A FEELING! | ACT I*, Charles has transformed Edinburgh Printmakers' ground floor space into a dazzling beauty salon complete with bright magenta walls, styling units with salon chairs, as well as an alluring pink velvet chaise-longue. A flamboyant vinyl mural, created with Glasgow-based artist and writer Hussein Mitha, adorns one wall. The mural, titled *GETTIN' READY | REST*, is a playful take on the hyper-stylised aesthetics of beauty salons. A large framed series of five screen-printed portraits titled *GETTIN' READY* line the walls, parallel to the salon chairs where the audience are invited to sit: installed in the place of salon mirrors, the artist invites the viewer to seat themselves to face them directly.

Charles uses the medium of printmaking in response to her childhood and formative years (and how this time period contrasts with her immediate environment in Scotland), through the use of multiple layers of vivid, celebratory colours and figurative visuals – all printed on shiny, fibrous paper surfaces. She calls herself a 'maximalist', with the intention of wanting to break free from Western institutional norms and standardisation which are often visually stale and monochromatic; opting instead for richly textured and highly contrasting colour choices. Charles intuitively understands the process of printmaking as being deeply connected to music: "I think printmaking connects so well with both dance and music; there are all these layers, in the sense that everything starts with a small thing and then something is added to it. You're literally layering over the top of it to find a happy medium in creating something unique to share with the world." This informs her approach to screenprinting, as does her lifelong relationship with dance – a profound sense of rhythm, musicality and gesture is certainly evident in these printed works.

Elsewhere in the space, TV screens mounted on the walls play two video works titled *GETTIN' READY | VIDEO AUDITIONS*, showing the make-up and self-care routines of five Black, Scotland-based female creatives. CC describes this time and space of self-fashioning as a "suit of armour": a way of preparing to face the world (and the set of experiences that Black women face specifically, which are deeply gendered and racialised). To her, the act of getting ready "feels so essential: there's so much care put into it. It's the only time that you're really fully thinking about yourself – you're literally treating your body, or grooming yourself in a particular way to appear in public."

The use of swirling, shifting printed material in the videos removes them from the 2D and into a more performative, playful space that feels inspired by gesture and movement. Audible in the background, a series of conversations play on a radio. Titled *GETTIN' READY | RADIO*, these conversations are a series of audio recordings where Charles engages in conversation with these five guests (all of whom are also close friends), reflecting on a range of topics including childhood dreams, ambitions, creative practice, womanhood, the progression of their careers and the presence of community and support networks. These interviews are filled with vulnerability and honesty, but also laughter and joy – anybody who knows CC personally in any capacity knows how infectious both her laugh and her lust for life is. While she does not feature in any of the works in her exhibition, the artist embellishes the space with her warm and welcoming presence through voice.

Hands play a central role in this exhibition and have become a continued symbolic presence in Charles's practice – they emerge, reach out, grasp one another; touching, gesticulating, holding, embracing; and in these works specifically, framing and caressing faces. She indicates that there are numerous interpretations one is able to make of hands – at once a symbol of care and nurture, but also strength and violence; they become an extension of the body and one's individuality, speaking for the person, their internal feelings and verbal

expressions. The artist shares that hands are one of the first things she observes when she encounters someone and this association goes all the way back to her upbringing where she was immersed in dance practice. Her mother ran a dance studio throughout the entirety of her childhood and teenage years, while her father was a radio DJ – making dance and music an integral part of her life and her practice: "I grew up in dance. I started taking dance classes when I was two. My mom ran a dance studio for 20 years, and I would take eight dance classes a week and I would go from school straight to dance classes, usually two to three dance classes a day. I didn't even go to parties in high school: my social life... was basically invested in dance in the communities surrounding me... so it was almost embedded in my head and my body in the sense of the discipline and care that I put in place for my methods."

This discipline and care that she absorbed in her early years have become integral to the ways in which she expresses herself through the various iterations of her practice. To further invite others into her community, she organised an American-style block party at the end of August as part of the exhibition, serving Nigerian food with music from Junglehussi, Moxxmma and Gemma Cairney. The

party was also an intentional gesture to disrupt the notion that gallery spaces are solely for viewing art. She suggests that institutions need to begin embodying these cross-cultural practices by observing how communities live and share within public spaces. She refers to this as the "stoop life": a reference to the shared staircases that adorn many multi-unit apartments in New York tenements that become social spaces in the warmer months of summer. On this sense of community she hopes to continue building. Charles candidly comments: "for me, it's figuring out the acts of service as an artist and how I can contribute to creating safe environments, but also environments that feel familiar to people that they can relax in. I'm not sure if people have labelled me as a healer, but I know I use joy to find ways to create space. [Spaces where] people don't need to be stressed, angry or worried about what's going on in their everyday lives, or what's going on in the world."

Christian Noelle Charles: *WHAT A FEELING!* | ACT I, *Edinburgh Printmakers*, part of *Edinburgh Art Festival 2023*, until 17 Sep

WHAT A FEELING! | ACT II will be presented in the form of 20-minute double-bill performances at *Take Me Somewhere Festival* at *Tramway* in October



Christian Noelle Charles