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A FIRST LOOK AT CEPHAS WILLIAMS' PORTRAIT OF BLACK BRITAIN EXHIBITION AT AVIVA STUDIOS

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Portrait of Black Britain by **Cephas Williams** opens today at **Aviva Studios**, **home of Factory International**. This significant large-scale photographic archive explores what it means to be Black, living in the UK. The exhibition is free to attend and runs from 2 October to 1 November in The Social at Aviva Studios.

Portrait of Black Britain photographs and profiles a range of Black people living in the UK, highlighting the different roles people play in our community. Its focus is not only on high-profile people and success stories, but as many people from as wide a range of society as possible, aiming to make more Black people visible and to offer the next generation and wider society an authentic and holistic picture of Black existence in the UK and the 21st century.

The exhibition was originally commissioned for **Manchester International Festival (MIF) 2021**, with 116 portraits initially shown as a major public exhibition in Manchester's Arndale Centre. *Portrait of Black Britain* has continued to grow since its launch and returns to the city where it was first presented this October, bringing together a total of 228 depictions of Black people living in the UK, from Manchester and beyond, including nine new portraits.

The concept was created by Cephas Williams at a time when candid conversations and dialogue about the Black community were taking a long-overdue centre stage, following the murder of George Floyd. In response, *Portrait of Black Britain* centralised Black-led representation on what it meant to be Black in the UK at that moment.

Cephas Williams said: *"Since MIF commissioned the exhibition in 2021, it's been great to see how many people have resonated with the work. Revisiting the photographs and exhibition has been both nostalgic and enriching and sharing it once again at Factory International's new home offers audiences an opportunity to experience the scale and significance of the project in a new way.*

"I think of the child who experienced Portrait of Black Britain for the first time in 2021 and how much can change in 5 years. Someone who was 5 is now 10; someone who was 15 is now 20. I often wonder how the exhibition may have inspired kids and adults alike, encouraging someone to pick up a camera or bring an idea they've had to life. As well as how the portrait series introduces its viewer to what it means to be Black through a positive and powerful lens."

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From the creator of *56 Black Men*, *Letter to Zion* and the Black Network, the exhibition is part of a body of work that will ultimately lead to Cephas Williams building a collection of 1,000 photographic portraits of Black people living in the UK. The project is a continuing powerful and positive affirmation of the beauty in identity and diversity, and the fact that the Black community is not a monolith.

Baka Bah - Filmmaker photographed for the 2026 exhibition of Portrait of Black Britain at Aviva Studios - said: *"Cephas does great work in the community. But actually, coming in for my portrait session and sitting down to speak to him has activated another layer of respect and admiration for the work he's done. Even the way he holds conversations with the people he works with. He doesn't just take your image; he pours into you as well.*

"It's crucial that this sort of work is being done and being recognised, especially by institutions such as Factory International for the position that a building like this holds within its city. Growing up in Moss Side, you don't really see a lot of this creative side of the world or your city. So, to be able to be almost drawn in from my community into Factory International, it's kind of beautiful."

Charles Lauder – Film, TV and Theatre Director and 2021 Portrait of Black Britain participant said: *"The Portrait of Black Britain exhibition is as relevant today as it was when Cephas first wrote his Letter to Zion and displayed the original Manchester collection. The work is a significant artistic and political statement about belonging; even as current events like the hounding of Professor Jason Arday demonstrate that, for many Black Britons, belonging continues to be more burden than birthright."*

Shirley May - Poet, Mentor and Author photographed for the 2026 exhibition of Portrait of Black Britain at Aviva Studios - said: *"I've seen Cephas' work before this, and I really admired it and what he was trying to say and do in terms of Black men in the UK and how are they perceived.*

"This exhibition of different men and women and people is important because there's not a lot of portraits of people who look like me, hanging in any portrait gallery anywhere in the UK. So, having this history recorded in this way, of people who have been on earth - whether they've done a little something and even if they haven't done an awful lot - there is something that lives beyond them. Having my portrait taken, I hope in years to come someone goes, "Oh there's my great, great, great granny!""

Adeola Adelakun - Lawyer, Entrepreneur and MIF21 Portrait of Black Britain participant - said: *"I think for me Portrait of Black Britain is about being able to capture the everyday Black person, it isn't about celebrities, it isn't about having achieved something incredible, it's just about being yourself as a Black person and the different variations that that can take. I feel like often in society, as a Black person, people expect us to be strong and extraordinary and there's no space to just be who you are, and this exhibition allows us to show up as we really are.*

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"I think when I was growing up in Manchester there weren't many things that looked like this and if I had seen something that looked like this, it would have blown my mind away. I'm so excited for people to come into Aviva Studios and see these portraits of people that live around them, particularly little Black boys and girls who probably don't see enough art that looks like them."

The exhibition is now open at Aviva Studios in The Social and free to attend for all visitors to the landmark cultural venue from 2 October to 1 November.

ENDS

DOWNLOAD PRESS IMAGES HERE

Download Portrait of Black Britain portraits from the online gallery here

Additional testimonies from people profiled in Portrait of Black Britain available here

LISTINGS:

Portrait of Black Britain (2 October – 1 November)
The Social, Aviva Studios | Free entry
Commissioned by Factory International and Co-Produced by Factory International and Cephas Williams
Find out more on the event page here

Press launch: 1 October

Cephas Williams | Artist Talk (17 Oct, 3-4pm)
The Social, Aviva Studios | Free - booking required
Join Cephas Williams, the creator of Portrait of Black Britain, in conversation with Factory International Artistic Director John McGrath.
Find out more on the event page here

For more information please contact:
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NOTES TO EDITORS:

About Cephas Williams:

Cephas Williams is the founder and photographer behind the groundbreaking *56 Black Men* campaign (2018), and *Portrait of Black Britain* (2021), he is the founder of The Black

Network launched alongside a letter Cephas penned to his first son Zion after the murder of George Floyd in 2020. He previously studied architecture and started his first business in 2009, years later Cephas created Drummer Boy Studios (similar to the WeWork model but for the creative industry) in a bid to democratise access into the creative industry and the spaces/tools needed to thrive within it.

Cephas believes everyone should have a fair chance to change their narrative and so utilising his degree in architecture, he created Drummer Boy Studios in 2017. Cephas set out to merge his passion for architecture and his passion for the community in a bid to create physical spaces that cater to those who often suffer the brunt of gentrification. The studio ran as a creative hub, a workspace with creative facilities; conducive for growth, innovation and collaboration for people interested in the creative sector including industries such as Music, Film, Media, Enterprise, Fashion and Gaming.

Upon doing this, Cephas was confused as to why things like this were not being spotlighted in the media, after all the work, money and time put into creating this space within the community and the success it gained. He had also secured a partnership with BDP to become the official development partner for the business.

Despite this, he was still facing opposition from people in the local council office and not being supported with the positive work he was doing; this coupled with issues surrounding racism with the council at the time, meant that Cephas stepped away from this business and set out to improve the systemic issues that often prohibit Black people from achieving their full potential.

He thought about how many more people from the Black community are doing great things but are never heard or spotlighted. Cephas started to question further, why is it that things like this never make headline news? And why the prevailing headline news about Black men was always surrounding knife crime or violence here in the UK. As a result, he decided to create the *56 Black Men* campaign to challenge the negative stereotypes of Black men in the media and spotlight positive achievements of the Black men through the series or portrait images.

After taking a series of portrait photographs of 56 Black men in hoodies, he launched *56 Black Men* as a campaign in the UK to change the predominant negative narrative regarding Black men in the media and as an introduction to a much wider conversation.

The campaigns Cephas has launched have reached both local and global audiences amassing millions of impressions and engagement across Instagram, LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. His work has also been featured in major publications such as The Guardian, The Metro, The Independent, on Sky News, BBC, Channel 5 and Aljazeera amongst many others, creating both a local and global impact.

In recent years Cephas set up The Black Network, an organisation set up to dismantle systemic racism in the UK and create an equal playing field for Black people in the UK. The Black Network has since signed up over 45 CEOs/Executives and 17 leading organisations in the UK, from Tesco, EY, Salesforce, O2 Telefonica, Bauer Media Outdoors, Accenture, The Co-op Group, Sainsburys, Publicis Groupe and more. He has been successful in

galvanising support for his vision for change, from businesses and key business leaders alongside friends such as Paul Polman (Ex CEO of Unilever), Simon Pegg and others.

Currently Cephas is focused on driving his vision for change through projects like *Portrait of Black Britain*. In a public letter to his son titled *Letter to Zion*, Cephas explores a heartfelt message and his thoughts around the much-needed change we need to see in the world, with specific reference to the Black community and the need for us to come together to see long lasting change.

About Factory International

Factory International is the organisation behind Manchester International Festival and the city's landmark cultural space, Aviva Studios.

Factory International commissions, produces and presents a year-round programme of original creative work and special events at Aviva Studios, online, and internationally through its network of co-commissioners and partners. It also stages the city-wide Manchester International Festival (MIF) every other year.

Factory International builds on the legacy of Manchester International Festival, one of the world's leading arts festivals, and the first to be entirely focused on the commissioning and producing of ambitious new work. Staged every two years in Manchester since 2007, world-renowned artists from different art forms and backgrounds create dynamic, innovative and forward-thinking new work in venues and spaces across Greater Manchester.

Aviva Studios was designed by the world-leading practice Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), with Ellen van Loon as lead architect – their first major public building in the UK. Its development was led by Manchester City Council, with backing from HM Government and National Lottery funding from Arts Council England.

Ultra-flexible in design, the building is based around large, open, adaptable spaces that can be constantly reconfigured, enabling artists to develop and create large-scale work of invention and ambition of a kind not seen anywhere else in the world. A unique canvas to make, explore and experiment, audiences can enjoy the broadest range of art forms - from major exhibitions and concerts to intimate performances and immersive experiences.

Factory International plays an important role in the lives of Greater Manchester residents, bringing jobs, skills, training and creative opportunities. Through the Factory Academy, Factory International is training the creative workforce of the future, while its pioneering creative engagement and artist development programmes create year-round opportunities for local people to get involved, from participating in flagship commissions to shaping the organisation through involvement in its public forums.

Factory International is an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation.
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