

RIP SENI: Press Release

Overnight on 24th June 2020, graffiti reading 'RIP SENI' appeared outside Bethlem Royal Hospital, London. This film is a reaction to that event.

Commissioned by Bethlem Gallery and the Lewis Family

Director: Daisy Ifama

Creative: Lizzie Reid

Producer: Grace Shutti

Executive Producer: Lucy Owen

UK 2021 / 20 min

RIP SENI World Premiere at Sheffield Doc/Fest 2021 in UK Competition on Sunday 6 June



Some questions about us, amended with RIP SENI spray paint. Original 2019 work by Mark Titchner. Still image from RIP SENI documentary

About the film

Overnight on 24th June 2020, graffiti reading 'RIP SENI' appeared on a public artwork outside Bethlem Royal Hospital, a psychiatric hospital in South London. The red spray-painted letters called attention to Seni Lewis, a 23-year-old black man who died at the hands of up to 11 police officers while in the care of the hospital in 2010.

The artwork "Some Questions About Us" had been created by Turner-prize nominee Mark Titchner and commissioned by Bethlem Gallery's Mental Health and Justice project. It is made up of eight placards asking questions about mental capacity and assessment, creating a powerful resonance between the artwork and the new graffiti.

Reflecting multiple perspectives on this event, we hear from Seni's friends and family, mental health professionals and Bethlem Royal Hospital service users. The film also features an intimate group discussion between Aji Lewis, Marcia Rigg, Anna Susianta and Donna Mooney, who have lost loved ones at the hands of the state.

RIP SENI looks at what happened to Seni, the crisis of mental health and racism in the UK, the long fight for justice and what happens when members of the public take art into their own hands.

Says Daisy Ifama, director:

"In September 2020 I was approached by Lucy Owen at Bethlem Gallery, and Ajibola Lewis, Seni's mother, to work collaboratively in developing a short documentary. I live in Lewisham and I've known the name Olaseni Lewis since I was 16 years old, but it wasn't until working with the Lewis family, speaking with members of the United Families & Friends Campaign and reading the details of their inquest investigations that I really understood the true horror at the centre of these stories and the insidious levels the state will go to to protect itself.

*In making **RIP SENI** Ajibola, Lucy and I wanted to explore the wide-ranging personal experiences of mental health, justice, community and art that respond to and ripple out from Seni's story. We brought in the valuable experience of creative Lizzie Reid and producer Grace Shutti, and together we set out to focus on and raise up contributors' lived experiences."*

Says Lucy Owen, executive producer of RIP SENI and producer of Bethlem Gallery's Mental Health and Justice project:

*"Mark Titchner's 'Some questions about us' asks questions of us all, and **RIP SENI** explores what happens when an artwork is answered. Seni's life and death reverberates still, as does Sean Rigg's, Jack Susianta's, Tommy Nicol's and many, many others. It's easy to speak flippantly about 'keeping a name alive', my hope is that this film shows just how complex, how painful and how necessary it is to do so."*

Says Ajibola Lewis, Seni's mother:

*"**RIP SENI** shines a light on the constant need for change in mental health services, the police & other state agencies where people are often unnecessarily restrained. We have to continue to get the message out there because there's still so much work to do ... we don't want anyone else to die like Seni did and we certainly don't want the death of restraining a person to be on the conscience of anyone. RIP SENI 🙏"*

Says Mark Titchner, Turner Prize nominated artist:

"Some questions about us' was intended as a work that explored boundaries. Conceived initially to consider the uncertain territory between the individual and the State and between intention and coercion; the questions it presented never suggested straightforward answers. As an artist working in the 'public realm' there is an implicit level of uncertainty about how an artwork is received or what it actually means to those who see it. In this case one unknown individual had a particular vision of what this artwork might be. As they transfigured the artwork, spray can in hand, something amazing happened and it became much more than I could have ever imagined. It began a conversation that led me to meet some incredible, strong people who have continued to ask the most difficult questions of the authorities and the State. Questions that urgently need to be answered."

RIP SENI (UK Competition) will receive its World Premiere at [Sheffield Doc/Fest 2021](#) on Sunday 6 June at 17.45

RIP SENI trailer: [ProRes link here](#) / [Mp4 link here](#)

RIP SENI film stills [here](#)

RIP SENI full press kit with crew and contributor bios, synopses, production notes and more [here](#)

RIP SENI Instagram page here: [@ripsenifilm](#)

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Editors' notes:

About Seni Lewis

Olaseni Lewis, known as Seni to his family and friends, died on the 3rd September 2010 after being restrained by up to 11 policemen whilst he was seeking help as a voluntary patient at the Bethlem Royal Hospital during his first ever psychotic episode. Seni Lewis was a son, a brother, an uncle, a grandson, a friend. Aged just 23 he had recently finished a Masters Degree in IT and Business Management at Kingston University, and was hoping to start a PHD.

He had no prior history of mental illness until the evening of Sunday 29 August 2010 when his family and friends noticed that he was behaving strangely. They sought professional help, resulting eventually in his admission as a voluntary patient at Bethlem Royal Hospital. Within hours of leaving him at the hospital, however, they were to learn that he had collapsed after being restrained by police officers who had been called by hospital staff. Seni was taken by ambulance to Mayday Hospital where brain stem death was confirmed.

The Lewis family campaigned for seven years to finally get an inquest and find out what had happened to Seni. In 2017, following 29 days of evidence, the jury came back with a unanimous verdict that the force used by police officers was "excessive, unreasonable, unnecessary and disproportionate". Despite the jury's verdict, the police officers involved were cleared of all wrongdoing over his death.

In 2018, the Mental Health Units (Use of Force) Act, or 'Seni's Law' was passed as a result of campaigning by the Lewis family and their local MP Steve Reed. The Bill will increase protections and oversight on use of force in mental health settings. However, it does not apply to the use of force by the police, in mental health units or otherwise, which remains a cause of continuing concern to the Lewis family and others who have lost their loved ones as a result of the use of such force.

For more information, visit the Justice for Seni campaign page: www.justiceforseni.com

About Bethlem Gallery

The Bethlem Gallery, established 1997, is situated on the grounds of The Bethlem Royal Hospital. Exhibitions and events are programmed throughout the year presenting a wide range of mediums and contemporary practice. Collectively we strive to develop the careers, experience and expertise of the gallery artists by creating opportunities for professional development. Our successful artist-in-residence projects also work with patients and staff on site to improve people's experience of the hospital environment.

The Bethlem Gallery programme includes collaborations with Bethlem Museum of the Mind, artists-in-residence, interdisciplinary research and partnerships with arts organisations across the UK and beyond. We campaign for access to the arts in healthcare environments and engage audiences in learning and debate on the subject of mental health and artistic practice. The gallery is free and open to all.

About Bethlem Gallery's Mental Health and Justice Project

Bethlem Gallery's Mental Health and Justice project is funded by Wellcome. It is a collaborative, innovative endeavour that places artists and their practice at the heart of current research. Bethlem Gallery aims to challenge the often exclusive or hierarchical conversations that have characterised the areas of mental health, law and fine art.

The artist-led programme interweaves with, and responds to, the work of researchers based at the Institute of Psychiatry Psychology & Neuroscience at King's College London. The research looks at public policy challenges that emerge where mental health and mental healthcare interact with principles of human rights.

The role of the artist and their practice is two-fold; to communicate nuanced context within and without the research and to provide an accessible platform for underrepresented voices to feed into and respond to complex research.

'Some questions about us' (2019), was a public artwork by Turner-Prize nominated artist Mark Titchner. It was the first of a series of works by Titchner relating to his involvement with the Mental Health and Justice project. For this work the artist presented a series of eight mirrored placards that confronted the viewer with direct questions

relating to issues around mental capacity and assessment. The graffitied version of the artwork has now been donated to the Bethlem Museum of the Mind, where it will become a permanent part of the hospital's history.

