

Andrew Saintsing: Hi, you're tuned into 90.7 FM KALX Berkeley. I'm Andrew Saintsing, and this is The Graduates, the interview talk show where we speak to UC Berkeley graduate students about their work here on campus and around the world. Today I'm joined by Kav Hambira from the Department of Art Practice. Welcome to the show, Kav.

Kavena Hambira: Hey, Andrew. Thanks for having me.

Saintsing: It's so great to have you here. I'm really interested in learning more about making art. You're actually wearing a sweatshirt that says "Creative Director." I really like that. You're just really advertising what you do. Did you pick that sweatshirt up or did you get that custom made?

Hambira: You know, it's... I have to say my ex-girlfriend gave me this sweatshirt, and I, you know, I, I can't hate on it because I love it so much even though she's my ex-girlfriend. I have to, I have to wear it because it's such a nice sweatshirt. And no, I don't also really feel like a creative director all the time, so it's literally a hoodie that like empowers me when I put it on. Kind of, when I have it on and I do feel like creative director. Wear what, um, you know, not what you're currently doing, but what you think you'll be doing in the next couple of years kind of thing.

Saintsing: All right, for sure. Okay, so we've said you're in art practice and I guess people can now gather that you're doing something with film if you're wearing a creative director sweatshirt. But could you tell us a little bit about, you know, who you are, what you're doing? Just to get started.

Hambira: For sure, yeah. So, you know, so my name is Kavena, Kav, and I'm a contemporary Namibian artist and filmmaker based here in in Oakland. And I'm currently in the MFA program at Berkeley, and I'm currently an MFA '22 candidate. So, I just finished my first year. I initially came to the US on a Fulbright many, many years ago in 2012, and after that experience I went back to Namibia and got into civil society. I guess here you refer to it as non-profit work. And it was really just a continuation of some of the volunteer work I was doing here in the Bay Area. I volunteered as a videographer for a few organizations, and some were art-based organizations, some of those organizations were unions, particularly ILWU, International Longshore Workers Union, here in Oakland, Local 10. And the Love, Not Blood campaign, which is run by two really incredible activists, civil rights activists here in the Bay Area. Referring specifically to Cephas "Uncle Bobby" Johnson, the uncle of Oscar Grant, and Beatrice Keaton X, and they both have been instrumental in really the work that I've been doing because through them I've connected with other families that have been impacted by state and community violence and really documenting their work around those issues.

Saintsing: So, you have your interest in... Most of what you're doing is to focus on these issues of state violence.

Hambira: Yeah, you know, I have to always throw out this disclaimer, because I never wanted to misrepresent myself, you know, as an African man living in the diaspora. You know I'm really interested in using the poetics of film to ask political questions but also provide opportunities for the exchange of public opinion. And you know a lot of my practice draws from my vantage point, again, as an African man. And not growing up in the US, I really had a very linear view of the American experience, and it was filtered through, you know, limited information. I grew up in the 90s, you know, pre-internet and, you know, I was really influenced by pop culture. America's number one export really is just popular culture, and I think my perception of the black experience was very far removed from the reality on the ground. You know I had this idea that America, you know, was always sold as this kind of land, the City on the Shining Hill, and, you know, a rising tide lifts all boats. But when I came to the US on a full ride, I really, you know, found it was a very different experience, and it wasn't really until the acquittal of George Zimmerman, Trayvon Martin's killer, when I really was exposed to this great injustice that's occurring in the streets of the United States, particularly as it relates to gun violence both in communities, but also by the state, particularly through the police force. And working with these families really awakened a thought around, you know, why it is perhaps we are not as exposed to these issues across the Atlantic, and I just felt there was a need to really digest and systematically lay out these issues, and it's with the idea that you're not just understanding, but also creating general awareness around these issues. And I didn't know how to express myself in a conventional way working in non-profit, civil society. Certainly couldn't do it in the corporate industry, so coming to art school pursuing an MFA was an opportunity to really incubate those ideas. And this is how I ended up at Berkeley.

Saintsing: You came here to pursue a graduate degree before the Berkeley degree? Or were you in a undergraduate program before you were in this program now you're at with Berkeley?

Hambira: That's correct. Not the latter, but the former. I came on a Fulbright in 2012 in a completely different field of study. You know, my focus was more on labor relations, cognitive resolution at the time. Not in the world peace, but more kind of organizational human resource space. And I really wasn't conscientized until I started volunteering. I, you know, picked up my camera. I picked up a camera, and I started filming, and I ended up in an art collective. Shout out to Inks of Truth in San Francisco. And I really just started familiarizing myself with the camera. And I mean I was filming everything. Just, you know, protests, shows, events. Like if they were opening an envelope, I was there.

Saintsing: Right. That was like your first experience filming?

Hambira: Yes. Mind you: I grew up with a camera. So, my father was a photojournalist. My father was the official between 1978 and 1984, he was the official photographer of the People's Liberation Movement in Namibia, and so I always grew up with a camera around. But I never really pursued it because, you know, I grew up in a society that prioritized material science over the arts, right? So, you know, "You're not gonna get a

job if you go to art school.” Like this was the kind of very traditionalist society I had grown up in, and I think to a certain extent, you... Some of these things, you think about and you live through, and it's not really until something occurs or some sort of rupture happens when you like understand, like there's really an opportunity to wake up every morning and pursue something with meaning. And I think that like it was very meaningful to pursue this work. And I found it almost like it haunted me, you know? Like I kind of felt like, in many ways, this is like, you know, (I don't want to sound spiritual, but, you know) it's like this is in my DNA, right? And it's only because I, you know, I didn't have access to the same opportunities. It's only because I wasn't exposed, you know, to an art space early on that I wasn't doing it early on. But now that I was in that space, now that I was living in a cosmopolitan city, and never mind state, like San Francisco. You're exposed to art galleries that you never were exposed to. You're going, you know, to screenings, to art spaces, and here in Oakland, there's a, you know, huge art community that I connected with. You know, meeting artists, Black artists, you know, it was like a kid in a candy store. And you know, that really is what shaped my experience outside of academia. It wasn't even... This was not what my Fulbright was about, right? And so, going back to Namibia, I understood that, you know, (and this was after my Fulbright), that there was still a lot of work that had to be done. Of course, I maintained relationships with a lot of, especially, the impacted families that I had worked with. When I'd come back to visit after one particular, I think, two years after my departure, I'd come back to visit, and I could still see you know that the situation hadn't really changed. In fact, I think at that stage much of the movement had subsided. I just continued to hold on to a lot of the footage, and I didn't know how to really pursue it further unless I was able to really kind of have a space to really incubate my ideas and produce the work. And coming to Berkeley allowed that. In fact, this year I produced my first short film, titled *The People's Uncle*, and we screened it in February, and it centered around this work.

Saintsing: Well, congrats on getting that film made and screened!

Hambira: Thank you!

Saintsing: Do you feel that you needed help with the craft of making films and that's why you're in this program now? Or this is kind of a space that's affording you opportunities to pursue projects that maybe you wouldn't have had a chance to pursue if you weren't in this program?

Hambira: Yeah, I think, I mean, I think it's a little bit of both, you know? At the at the very core, I'm a storyteller who produces work that unearths caveats that are suppressed by dominant narratives, meaning my work doesn't always have to take the form of a documentary film. I want to believe that a lot of my work is research-based. It's a research-based social practice, and in order to really understand and get to the core of some of these ideas and challenges that I'm exploring, I needed to be in an institution that has a research facility, that has research facilities. The Pacific Archive, of course. The Berkeley, the BAMPFA, and its specific archive at the Berkeley Museum. And it's an

immeasurable resource. It's an immeasurable resource. It's also very costly to produce film. So, just things like having access to equipment, the right equipment, the right camera equipment, lights, audio, studio to mix sound. These are all resources that are available to me now where I never had them before. And that's just like, that's just the reality. I mean, if I'm filming in Namibia, and I crack my Canon 70D, there's like one official Canon provider who'll quote me and then tell me to come back after two months to replace the lens because here we have to order the part from South Africa. So, like, you know, we, living in a developed country and growing up in a developing country, it gives me, you know, two very unique experiences. And I think that's also what I can talk about, that vantage point. I struggled to mix, I was really struggling to make sense of all of that because, you know, I'm trying to connect these dots that are related not just to my own personal history, but to a collective history. Black history is global history, you know. So, just being close to institutions that have the required archives that I need to reference so I could actually see them and feel them and touch them. You know, a good example is a Marcus Garvey archive, you know. And so, yeah, you know, as I'm exploring the space between Africa and its people in the diaspora, I did also find (and I think this goes to the second part of your question) like I needed to be here physically to produce this work. And I just happened... Obviously, I don't want to say, but I've come at the right time because I've been documenting some of these families for almost eight years. And so, you know, you incur a debt. You incur a debt, and I wanted to do good by that promise, you know, because a lot of these families, they trust you to come into their space and help them tell their story about their lost loved one as they continue to pursue justice. And so, I felt it was important to really honor and honor them by producing work with care, and that's why I needed to enroll in a program. Because I just, I was lacking, like I said the research and just access to resources to complete this work.

Saintsing: I'm really interested to know more about this film you made, just actually the content of it. But I also am just interested also in the program that you're in. Is art practice very heavily focused on film at Berkeley? Is it just kind of lots of different media, and you're one of several filmmakers among various artists?

Hambira: I'll tackle your second question first because I can remember that since you asked it last. But no, yes. So the Art Practice Department at Berkeley is by far one of the best in the country, and that's primarily because it's structured like an art residency. And you're correct, Andrew, in that you have a really a gaggle of different artists. And you know, we all have different forms. We'll produce different work, but this is really... I see a very common thread where really this year we're the first, probably the most diverse cohort in the history, the 50+ years history of the Berkeley MFA program, you know. BIPOC, intersectional group of students. I'm one of two filmmakers in a cohort of six. We have, you know, artists that come from different parts of the country and different parts of the world, from the UK, Namibia, where I'm from in southern Africa, and here in California. And that, you know, I think going through COVID with this group, with this cohort has also been really important. I think it's an important experience because it's unique in many ways that we develop these relationships, really meaningful relationships, without physically being in the same space, having a group show without being physically in the

same space. So, there were unique challenges we've had to overcome, and I think that's really created an even more exceptional bond, created deeper more meaningful connections. And to your second part of the question: You know, I really appreciate you asking because you know this work, this particular film is my central focus at Berkeley, and I really wanted to use the next, or I wanted to use the two years that I'm here to experiment with different forms, particularly narrative and an installation definitely interrogating the white cube space in a gallery. And then of course this is the documentary, my most preferred form. And this film really is about the life of Cephus Johnson and Beatrice Keaton, affectionately known as Uncle Bobby and Aunt B. The married couple, particularly Uncle Bobby, who is the uncle of Oscar Grant, was really a systems engineer from Silicon Valley, from San Jose when his life took a really sharp turn after the murder, the killing of his nephew Oscar Grant in January 2009. And understanding that they were really the first family, this was the first case in the state's history, in the history of the state of California, to have a police officer not only arrested, tried, and convicted, but also sentenced. Many other families around the United States looked at them and the Oscar Grant case almost as a blueprint to seeking justice for their loved ones that have been killed in a similar way. And understanding that there is this unfortunate need. A lot of families started reaching out to them for help and assistance, and through that they developed the Oscar Grant Foundation, and now the Love, Not Blood Campaign, which embraces families from around the country that have been impacted or that are suffering from police and community violence. And they really have been doing this work selflessly and without seeking any sort of praise or acknowledgement. And around the time I started volunteering for the organization as a videographer, I remember going to Chicago in 2015 for the 60th anniversary of Emmett Till's death and meeting all of the other families, the other impacted families, and hearing their stories. And you know, really because when we spent an entire weekend together and I was documenting them in these different spaces, I started really seeing them beyond the symbolism, right? You know, I was almost trying to understand how they've become these symbols, but especially their children have become these symbols, and we look beyond their pain, we oftentimes no longer see them any longer. And it made me think about, especially experiencing that weekend with the families, it made me think about the work that still to lay ahead for them as they sought justice for their loved ones, and I thought it was really important for folks to understand what happens when an issue is no longer trending, when the hashtag fades away. These families are still left with this pain, and they still are pursuing justice for their loved ones, and I really wanted to shed light. And this is what this film and the work that they do is all about.

Saintsing: When you make a film, when you make a documentary, what do you see as your role after it's made? Do you think... I guess as an artist more generally, are you showing people things and then trying and then hoping that now that people's eyes are opened, they will pursue action? Or do you see a place for yourself then actually pursuing action based on the films that you made?

Hambira: Yeah, like, again I think it's brilliant. It kind of speaks to... It's a brilliant question, and it kind of speaks to what we spoke about early around this vantage point, you know, this idea that I am really operating as a conduit, you know, between southern African, as an African, and the African diaspora. And so, I'm speaking to multiple audiences, and I think because we live in such a time of disinformation, you need to be able to filter your information through facts, and by supplementing that evidence with the work, the hope is that, I'm providing an opportunity for the exchange of public opinion, you know, I'm using the poetics of film to ask political questions, but, you know, I don't necessarily have the solutions. But what I do want to be able to do is bring my work into spaces that typically won't be having these conversations and activate those spaces. I grew up in Namibia. For those that don't know, Namibia at one point was part of South Africa. Up until 1990, we were literally by a mandate. And this mandate, I don't want to go down the rabbit hole here, emanates from the League of Nations after, since we're a former German colony, after Germany lost the World War, we basically got incorporated into to the South African Union, and we grew up under apartheid. Our parents were political exiles that were fighting to emancipate, and they used their youth, the best years of their lives to help liberate their country. And so, growing up under that duress, understanding how it's displaced people within my own family, myself, my own person (I grew up in East Germany, right? I was displaced in that way.) You start to infer trends, and I really wanted to explore some of these broader issues because police brutality is really just a manifestation of a broader system, right? Like this police brutality is one manifestation of a white supremacist system. Now what happens if we explore the Black experience in Southeast Asia? What happens if we explore the Black experience in East Africa? What happens if we explore the Black experience in Bakersfield, California? I mean, you can infer the similar trends. There are many similar trends, and my goal is to connect these dots. I want folks to, even if I'm, and this is why when I talk about unearthing caveats that are swapped over by dominant narratives, I'm talking about these stories that may be perceived by someone on the other side of the world as being insignificant or unconnected to their own struggle. And this is why I say Black history is global history. So, you know, this work and during my time at Berkeley, I want to really go deep. I want to really find how these struggles are connected, and when you watch the film, you'll see there's a montage in the film that I literally refer to as a Sankofa moment, and it takes it back to Africa. It takes it back to Africa, and it's that portion of the film that speaks to what I'm talking about now.

Saintsing: Would listeners be able to watch the film? Is it available widely?

Hambira: Yes, so because the film was, the show was... The first year MFA show was hosted during COVID-19. We had a virtual exhibition, so you are still able to go to the website, the exhibition website, and that website if you'd like, the details are whenthingsgetbacktonormal.net That's one word. whenthingsgetbacktonormal.net You'll be able to see the work of not just myself, but all the other six artists in the show. Let me maybe just quickly give some space and share a little bit about their work. The first artist is Erica Deeman. Erica is a visual artist from Nottingham, from the UK. And Erica's work intersects race, gender, and the hybridity of Black identity. Then there's also

Edgar Fabian Frias. Edgar's from Los Angeles and is a non-binary, queer, indigenous, and brown, multi-disciplinary artist, curator, educator, and psychotherapist by the way. The third artist is Hala Kaddoura, and that's also the other filmmaker. She has a film background, but Hala is a Palestinian-American artist, a community builder, social impact initiator, and is also an educator. You have Ahn Lee, from Los Angeles, a non-binary, queer, Cantonese artist and researcher. And then we have last, but not least, is Rivka. And Rivka, also known as Kakou, is an Oakland-based mixed media visual artist, writer, educated performer, and community organizer. So, I really encourage you, if you haven't had an opportunity already, go to whenthingsgetbacktonormal.net, check out all of their work. You'll also be able to catch my film there. And if you want to just go directly to my website as well, you'll be able to watch the film, and that's kavcavalier.com

Saintsing: Unfortunately, it looks like we are running out of time on the interview. Is there anything you'd like to leave us with before we go?

Hambira: Yeah, I think I personally just want to thank you being an audience member, if you're listening you are an important member of the community and just understand that you equally have a role to play, however big or small, and don't underestimate that role.

Saintsing: Today, we've been speaking with Kav Hambira from the Department of Art Practice. Again, thank you so much for being on the show, Kav.

Hambira: Andrew, I appreciate that.

Saintsing: Tune in in two weeks for the next episode of The Graduates.