

Portrait of Sir Geoff Palmer installed at the Portrait Gallery

A 19-minute long video portrait of Sir Geoff Palmer created by Scottish artist Graham Fagen has been acquired by National Galleries of Scotland and can be viewed now at the Portrait Gallery.

Professor Sir Geoff Palmer, OBE, is a well known human rights activist and scientist and the video tells the story of his life since growing up in Jamaica to becoming the first black professor in the UK.

Fagen was inspired by Sir Geoff after seeing him and hearing him speak at public events. The artist said that Sir Geoff's warmth and compassion, while expressing his life experiences and views on contemporary Scotland and its historic relationship with the transatlantic slave trade, motivated him to create a contemporary portrait that captured the sitter's essence and personality.

In the single channel video portrait Sir Geoff can be heard talking about life in Jamaica and life since he became an esteemed academic. Sir Geoff is Chancellor of Heriot-Watt University where he has conducted much of his career. The film shows a bracelet decorated with the Jamaican flag which the scientist wears on his wrist. During the pandemic Sir Geoff wore a mask showing the Jamaican flag.



Professor Sir Geoff Palmer at the Black Lives Matter Protest in Holyrood Park in June 2020. Photo: Martin P. McAdam
www.martinmcadam.com

Fagen's portrait is different from traditional portraiture. He wanted to show the way that Sir Geoff can command our attention with his humility and consideration as he engages us in a brutal history with harsh truths. Sir Geoff's research experience as a life scientist enables him to evidence, in a matter-of-fact way, the truths of the history that connects Jamaica, the country of his birth, with Scotland, the country of his home, via the experience of the Windrush generation. By working in collaboration with the subject of the portrait, Fagen has made a work that expands our perceptions and offers new thought and knowledge on the complexities of portraiture.

From seeing and hearing Sir Geoff speak, Fagen wanted to capture his personality in the portrait – his voice, his autobiography, his thoughts, his hopes – as well as a likeness: his head, eyes, nose, ears and mouth. To bring the soundtrack to life Fagen worked with reggae musician Ghetto Priest, with whom he had previously collaborated on *The*

Slave's Lament.

Sir Geoff Palmer OBE is a life-long human rights activist and historian of Scotland's relations with the Caribbean.

After leaving Jamaica for London in 1955 aged 14, he attended school in the city, eventually continuing his studies at Leicester, Edinburgh and Heriot-Watt universities where he lectured, later becoming a professor of brewing and distilling. As a scientist, his research at the Brewing Research Foundation from 1968–77 led to the discovery of the barley abrasion process – which makes the malting process more efficient. For this research, he was awarded the American Society of Brewing Chemists' Award of Distinction in 1998.

He is the author of a critically acclaimed book, *The Enlightenment Abolished: Citizens of Britishness*, in which he argues for maintaining but reinterpreting public monuments associated with the transatlantic slave trade. He is also the Chair of the Edinburgh and Lothians Regional Equality Council (ELREC).

Graham Fagen said: "I was extremely honoured to work with Sir Geoff in order to make an artwork that shares his life and work. Geoff's life is one that has profoundly influenced and shaped the world we live in today."

Sir Geoff said: "We cannot change the past but we can change consequences such as racism for the better using education. I hope my portrait can help bring awareness to these matters."

Sir John Leighton, Director-General of National Galleries of Scotland said: "We are proud to display Graham's wonderfully moving portrait of Sir Geoff Palmer. This work recognises Sir Geoff's many achievements and is an important acquisition that we are delighted to welcome into Scotland's national collection."



Graham Fagen and Professor Sir Geoff Palmer, OBE. PHOTO Neil Hanna Photography



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