

“London is never London...”

Gilane Tawadros and Janette Parris

An old, wooden luggage trolley is stacked with parcels of various shapes and sizes, individually wrapped in brown paper, tape and string. Each parcel carries a hand-written cardboard label, meticulously detailing its contents. At intervals, the mournful voice of a man singing rises from the stack. Over and over again, cantor Josef Rosenblatt ritualistically sings a fragment of the Jewish morning prayer thanking God for restoring the soul after sleep. Retrieved from the muddy gutter of a street in London’s East End by the artist Susan Hiller, the parcels contain items apparently discarded during demolition of a building that once housed a tiny shop-front synagogue. As with other of Susan Hiller’s works, *Untitled*, 1999, re-claims what has been overlooked and relegated to the periphery: “Three of them are remnants of ritual objects (bima curtain, Torah cover, altar cloth): the fourth is a large ledger from the synagogue’s defunct burial society into which I’ve inserted an old monograph about the numerous ‘small synagogues’ that once served London’s Jewish community...the truthfulness of the labels of the wrapped parcels and their significance has to be taken on faith, because what’s inside, like the soul, isn’t visible”.¹ Poised as if in transit from one place to another, it is unclear whether these parcels are destined for any particular location. No destination has been marked on the luggage labels. These abandoned sacred objects whose owners have disappeared from view uncomfortably recall the repeated, violent expulsions and displacements of Jewish communities that originally brought those communities as migrants to the East End of London.

A Pakistani migrant woman’s arrival to a new life underpins Osman Yousefzada’s installation *An Immigrant’s Room of Her Own*, 2018. In a re-creation of his mother’s bedroom which the artist has described as a migrant version of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, household furniture, cooking pots and personal possessions have been wrapped up in cloth and plastic. Perhaps these objects are being kept purposefully pristine and unused or are in a state of readiness in case their owner needs to gather up their belongings and relocate once again at short notice. Yousefzada’s installation speaks to the provisional conditions of many migrants either on account of their political or financial precarity or their anticipation of eventually being able to return ‘home’ at an unspecified point in the future: “You take these things into your new life but you don’t end up living your new life, that’s the

¹ Susan Hiller, Unpublished artist’s note.

contradiction”.² Storytelling lies at the heart of Yousefzada’s practice, both his art and his writings (and in particular his memoir *The Go-Between*), which mine his personal history as the child of Pashtun immigrants to Birmingham to articulate the ambiguous and elusive after-effects of migration and displacement: “No.12 Willows Road was our house, with its holy green door. Down here on earth the doors of the faithful were always painted green, signifying the colour of the pure, the colour of Islam. We straddled the boundary of Balsall Heath and Moseley. It was on this street and those around it that all the immigrants – Black, white, brown – were housed; the prostitutes, the pimps, the broke artists and the ultra-orthodox, all searching for a better life here or in the hereafter.”³

Janette Parris’ digital drawings are defiantly described by the artist as the opposite of a memoir. Drawn from her forthcoming artist’s book *This is Not a Memoir*, 2023, which she describes as a ‘graphic A-Z for East and South London’, Parris evokes the style of comic books and graphic novels to create a series of vibrant digital drawings. The works included in the exhibition humorously map locations in the East End which are of significance in the artist’s personal life but also in a wider social history of London. Parris’ chosen sites mark important locations in the artist’s life journey: the Ilford Palais, the first nightclub the artist attended; the old Upton Park stadium of her beloved football team, West Ham; the Royal Mail Sorting Office in Farringdon where she worked night shifts alongside completing a fine art degree at Goldsmiths College; the Granada television rental shop; and the Boleyn Cinema in East Ham where she first saw Stanley Kubrik’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*. Through wry and comic commentaries on her own life and experiences, Parris simultaneously charts the pleasures and struggles of working-class life in East London from night-shift working which induces exhaustion and illness to the joys of disco dancing late into the night. Parris skilfully interweaves her personal evolution into an artist with the transformation of popular landmarks and locations in East London.

A constellation of manhole-like iron casts originally conceived as a site-specific public sculpture, *Written in Water*, 2022, was first embedded in the paving along the banks of the Hertford Union Canal on Fish Island. Scattered across the upper floor of Whitechapel Gallery, each iron cast is embossed with short text which conjures up East End lives, past and present, which speak to the diversity and precarity of the local area: “The local culture

² Osman Yousefzada quoted by Claudia Croft in ‘Osman Yousefzada Launches a New Exhibition on the Experience of Migration’, 7 June 2018. <https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/osman-yousefzada-ikon-gallery-being-somewhere-else>

³ Osman Yousefzada, *The Go-Between: A Portrait of Growing Up Between Different Worlds* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2022)

emerges from between the cracks in the pavements, as with Bashy's gleeful recollection of the notoriously dilapidated Déjà Vu pirate station in Waterden Road. These places, often in derelict warehouses and vacated factories, provided temporary homes for counterculture, most of which disappeared as the area was developed when the Olympics arrived in Stratford on the east bank of the River Lea".⁴ Like ripples on the surface of the River Lea, these fragile histories risk disappearing forever. The unrelenting cycles of radical change and upheaval threaten to bury the stories and lives which Cobbing has retrieved and amplified:

BARGEMEN GAZED OUT AT MR GANDHI FROM THEIR NIGHTWORK AS HE WALKED ALONG THE LEA FROM KINGSLEY HALL; THE NAVIES DREDGING MUD WOULD SHOUT THEIR GREETING.⁵

BRIDGET AND I CAME DOWN TO THE EAST END FOR A DRINK. WE SAW A GUY FITTING OUT HIS BOAT BY A DERELICT WAREHOUSE, WITH GREAT OPEN SPACES FOR STUDIOS.⁶

SHE USED TO ROW TEN OF THEM IN A LONG BOAT ACROSS THE CANAL TO THE PUB BY CLARINCO'S ALL OF THEM ON THE BEER. THEN ROW BACK, CHARGE 'EM A PENNY A TIME.⁷

WHEN LOCKDOWN BEGAN A DOCTOR ASKED HACKNEY WICK MUTUAL AID FOR HELP TO SEW MEDICAL SCRUBS, SO WE DESIGNED A PATTERN AND RALLIED VOLUNTEERS TO MAKE THEM.⁸

The streets of East London are the setting for Mitra Tabrizian's *Film Stills*, 2017-2018, a series of C-type photographic prints which range in size and scale. While film stills are customarily photographs of the main character or characters, taken on a film set to introduce and publicise a film, Tabrizian's film stills deviate from that approach. Inspired by her feature film *Gholam* (2018) which tells the story of an enigmatic Iranian taxi driver in London, Tabrizian focuses on actors rejected from the cast, extras, and empty landscapes. Playing on the formal and structural qualities of film and image-making, Tabrizian invites us to consider the relationship between what is 'within the frame' - central, included and

⁴ William Cobbing, 'Artist's Statement', 2023

⁵ Muriel Lester, 'Entertaining Gandhi', Ivor Nicholson and Watson Ltd, 1932.

⁶ Bridget Riley and Peter Sedgley interview about their artist studio move to Martello Street and Stepney Green. Filmed by Space Studios (1970)

⁷ Ronnie. Transcript of recording 'Mapping the Change: Old Ford Voices and Island Memories Oral History', Tower Hamlets Local History Library and Archive (2011)

⁸ Annabel Maguire, Hackney Wick Mutual Aid Scrub Hub (2020)

dominating our attention - and what lies 'out-of-the-frame' - excluded, superfluous and out-of-view. As with her film *Gholam*, Tabrizian's collection of images leave the narrative open to interpretation, portraying "the 'unseen' city of migrants, living on the edge – and the sense of being on the 'other-side'".⁹ In spite of the gap between the two, they are caught in a dependency between each other: those who are central to the unfolding narrative and those who circulate at its edges. Ultimately they depend on and shape each other.

John Smith's seminal film *The Girl Chewing Gum*, 1976, wittily undermines mainstream cinema by drawing attention to its artifice rather than attempting to disguise it. Shot continuously on 16 mm black and white film on an intersection near a cinema in Hackney, a voice-over of the artist appears to direct the action in a busy London street. The artist's 'direction' of the movements of passers-by eventually becomes even more absurd when Smith starts to direct pigeons or the hour hand of a clock. Decades after the film was made, it has acquired new layers of meaning. Smith's parody of the idea of the film-maker as an all-powerful figure who determines the action in which participants have no agency resonates with contemporary concerns about the manipulation of power and the media to proliferate fake news. As the artist notes, the film has also become "an almost exotic record of a distant time, where passers-by look like actors in period costumes, a difference made even more apparent by the ongoing gentrification of the film's East London location. To many young people the film looks like a relic from the early days of cinema, confirmed by school student blogs I have encountered which state that the black and white film, composed of only two shots, was made before colour film was invented, and before filmmakers learnt how to edit."¹⁰

Reflecting poetically about *Fatima's Letter*, 1992, the artist Alia Syed wrote: "London is never London but contains traces of other cities, the poignancy of the landscape lies in its ability to conjure, the sound of a horn, Karachi – one city falls into another." Shot almost entirely at Whitechapel underground station, Syed's film revolves around a woman who remembers her past from faces she sees while travelling on the London Underground. The story, which takes the form of a letter to her friend Fatima, is spoken in Urdu with subtitles in English, although the sub-titles do not always appear in conjunction with what is spoken and it is impossible to grasp the narrative which unfolds in fragments. Shadows and reflections flit continuously across the screen and the only constant seems to be Whitechapel train station through which countless bodies and sounds flow unceasingly. London collapses into Karachi and the past falls into the present. As viewers of Syed's film,

⁹ Mitra Tabrizian, 'Film Stills,' January 2018.

¹⁰ John Smith, 'Artist's statement on *The Girl Chewing Gum* and the passing of time', 2022.

we cannot help but also feel disorientated and displaced, unsure of where we are and what we can hold onto.

Working with paint rather than film, Jerome's *Action Black*, 2018-Present, engages with how living moments can be captured and expressed through the medium of paint. After applying glossy black paint to vinyl flooring and allowing it to dry, the artist 'exposes' the vinyl flooring to various events where participants are invited to write what they are feeling on the flooring, and to walk on and stress the surface of the floor boards. Over the course of successive events – a fashion show, a Black Lives Matter protest, dinners and performances – the flooring acquires traces of lived experience that activate the work. The paint is later stripped from the floorboards and used as a medium within the artist's *Action Black* paintings. Jerome describes the different stages through which the work evolves as "pre-activation, activation, post activation and reactivation." Jerome moves intentionally away from the idea of action painting as a singular act or gesture of applying paint to canvas, limited to the artist himself. Rather, these works are contingent on the actions and words of others, setting the works in motion. For Jerome *Action Black* adds "another angle to the conversation that Pierre Soulages' 'Outrenoir' ('Beyond Black') paintings beautifully address...but instead utilises the lived experience of the black paint, capturing something living, something important and something now all at the same time."¹¹

Matthew Krishanu's enigmatic figurative paintings *Bows and Arrows*, 2018, *Boy on a Climbing Frame*, 2022, and *Four Children (Verandah)*, 2022 do not depict specific individuals or events but rather evoke a mood or atmosphere which is often ambiguous and troubling: two boys armed with slingshots, apparently about to take aim and fire; the boy frozen at the top of a climbing frame who may be fixed in fear, or about to jump; and the children waiting expectantly for something to happen, or perhaps belligerently confronting us, the viewers? Like a writer who synthesises the manners and gestures of different people they meet to fashion fictional characters, Krishanu distils memories of people, places and events in his personal history to create paintings which collapse time and geography. By contrast, Krishanu's series of paintings *In Sickness and In Health*, 2007-2022 emerge from a specific period of time and relationship in the artist's life. Made by the artist over the course of more than a decade of a life spent together with the writer Uschi Gatward before her untimely death from cancer in late 2021, they chart Uschi's life journey through marriage, childbirth, motherhood and dying. Small in scale, these intimate paintings bring together

¹¹ Jerome, 'Artist Statement', May 2023.

interwoven personal histories with the entangled histories of painting from Gwen John and Edward Hopper to Frida Kahlo and Indian miniature painting.

Filmed from the artist's window during the first English lockdown, John Smith's incisive and playful *Citadel*, 2022, combines short fragments from British Prime Minister Boris Johnson's speeches relating the coronavirus with views of the London skyline to create a damning indictment of the privileging of business interests over public health. While Smith's camera remains fixed in place, the weather and light constantly change as we move from day to night, from winter to summer. As the Covid pandemic unfolds and the death toll rises, the film shifts its focus from the city's gleaming skyscrapers to the inhabitants of the dense urban housing that lies in their shadow. Smith's camera picks out mundane, night-time scenes of life under lockdown, Vermeer-like vignettes spotlight a woman exercising in her living room, a man working on his laptop, a couple washing up and clearing the kitchen after a meal. In the eerie, evening cityscape of lockdown, electric lighting seems to take on a life of its own, first of all, mirroring Boris Johnson's speech patterns in a newly-completed office block in Bishopsgate and then flashing on and off to spell out SOS in Morse code in adjacent domestic housing.

Curtains of powder-coated chain-link fencing fall from the ceiling of the upper gallery of the Whitechapel Gallery to create a coloured metal structure which is, by turns, playful and menacing. Rana Begum's *No. 1272 Chainlink*, 2023, continues the artist's interest in blurring the boundaries between painting, sculpture, design and architecture. Responding to the ubiquity of fencing material in the American landscape which is used to enclose everything from domestic suburban properties to high-security military compounds, Begum has adopted and transformed chain-link fencing into material for a series of installations and sculptures. The artist skilfully manipulates its form and colour to neutralise its violent association with closed borders and insurmountable barriers and render it as a constantly shifting structure, altering with the variations in natural light and the movement of the viewer: "I want the works to be constantly something that spark curiosity, throwing up questions. I love trying to find that balance between where an artwork is neither one thing nor another, and celebrating the fact that it can be both. A work can be made from a heavy and weighty material, for example, but in the way that it looks it can imply that it is light and full of air. I enjoy that constant battle, that grinding between the two."¹²

¹² Rana Begum in conversation with Lisa Le Feuvre in *Rana Begum: Space Light Colour* (London: Lund Humphries, 2021)

Susan Hiller's two related works *The J.Street Project (Index)*, 2002-2005 and *The J.Street Project (Film)*, 2002-2005 came out of a DAAD residency in Berlin in 2002-3. Walking around the city, the artist came across a street sign bearing the name *Judenstrasse* ('Jews Street'). Hiller was shocked and confused to find a street name intended as a respectful commemoration which in fact was a commemoration of a complex history of racism, segregation and violence. Over the next three years, the artist mapped every German street, lane, alley and avenue with the prefix 'Juden' in its name. *The J.Street Project (Index)*, 2002-2005 is an installation made up of 303 colour photographs hung in a massive grid and accompanied by a large-scale map of Germany with each location listed and pinpointed. *The J.Street Project (Film)*, 2002-5 presents a sequence of static camera shots of these inner-city shopping streets, dreamy lanes, anonymous suburbs, and secluded country roads, as the soundtrack records traffic noise, church bells and other incidental sounds. "All my work deals with ghosts," Hiller has said and these works powerfully articulate how Germany's past continues to haunt the present. The quotidian and mundane nature of these streets and alleys merely heightens dissonance between the banality of the present and the violent and traumatic past to which they testify: "A photographic image can only, ever, represent things as they are in the present moment when the image is 'taken'. But the present is a summation of everything that precedes it and each photograph will be seen in the context of everything that happens afterwards. In that way, *The J. Street Project* has allowed me to reflect not only on one unique, incurable, traumatic absence, but also on more recent attempts to destroy minority cultures and erase their presence."¹³

Like Hiller's *The J.Street Project*, Sarah Dobai's single-screen film *The Donkey Field*, 2021 similarly reflects on how historical events in the past continue to resonate and reverberate in what happens in the present. The film weaves a link between a racist attack on a young boy on a piece of common land known locally as 'the donkey field' and the story of the persecution of Marie and the donkey Balthazar in Robert Bresson's film *Au Hasard Balthazar* (1966). The film features a text, based on sections of a memoir of Budapest in the last year of World War II, and scenes which re-enact and re-frame Bresson's allegorical story about the scapegoating of innocent subjects: "The making of the film", writes Dobai, "was prompted by recognising the historical echo of the refugee crisis in Europe, to the plight of Jews in World War II. Particularly relevant to this was the report of an episode at Keleti Station, in Budapest (2015) where refugees from Syria and Afghanistan were kettled and then herded onto a train, apparently bound for Munich, and then, to their terror, forced off into a camp in the middle of the Hungarian Plains."¹⁴

¹³ Susan Hiller, Artist's Statement, 2005.

¹⁴ Sarah Dobai from a talk at Baltic, Gateshead January 2022

Made over twenty years ago, Mark Wallinger's *Threshold to the Kingdom*, 2009 takes on renewed significance in relation to increasingly intolerant and inhumane measures in recent years to stem the flow of migrants and refugees crossing England's borders. Shot in a single take from a fixed position at London's eastern City Airport, *Threshold to the Kingdom* is a single channel colour video projection which tracks arrivals to the airport in slow motion footage, accompanied by a soundtrack of *Miserere*, a seventeenth-century setting of the fifty-first psalm in the Bible by the Italian composer Gregorio Allegri (c.1582-1652). Wallinger sets up a playful equivalence between crossing the highly-controlled and monitored state threshold into the United Kingdom and crossing a religious threshold into the Kingdom of Heaven: "In negotiating the more or less authoritarian or coercive apparatus of the state which define and control one's progress from 'air-side' to land-side', one is perhaps reminded of a kind of secular equivalent of the progression from confession to absolution. Eventually, all that separates us from the no-man's land and the official terra firma of the state are a pair of automatic doors."¹⁵

Positioned adjacent to the exit from the upper galleries at Whitechapel Gallery, Wallinger's film is a powerful reminder of the inequities between those who have free, unproblematic passage to travel and cross borders and those whose routes are precarious and life-threatening. London is never London, as Alia Syed writes, not only because it contains the traces of other cities but also because its inhabitants experience vastly different versions of the city which frequently sit cheek by jowl. The works assembled in this exhibition create an archaeology of the present which, to paraphrase Susan Hiller, is a summation of everything that precede them it and will be seen in the context of everything that happens afterwards.

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¹⁵ Mark Wallinger, Artist's Statement, 2000