

Chasing Mirrors

A discussion between artist, Faisal Abdu'allah, and Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz, Professor of African art, aesthetic and culture at Stanford University, California, United States of America.

Bárbaro Martínez-Ruiz:

Where do you find inspiration?

Faisal Abdu'Allah:

Silence is a time when I am inspired, totally submerged, in my own selfish fantasy. But primarily it's the human condition and its struggle to comprehend itself. I am fortunate that my studio is a social space that lends itself to looking, meddling and listening but more importantly a space where kaleidoscopic thought, narrative and contemporary jibe often find their way into an artifact or as I would sometimes call 'arty fiction.'

Can you discuss the relationship between your very direct visual narrative of blending single portraits and your complex relationship with London and the people that inhabit it?

The lens is a great device that explores relationships and complexities of migration. London is a great point of departure in so much as identity was a fixed narrative but now it presents itself as a moveable feast. Issues relating to the portrait becoming a tool of evidence are far more refreshing than attributing notions of behavior and expectation. The generic non-committal content of *Chasing Mirrors* reflects London's dance with its dwellers. Forever chasing utopias of excellence, lifestyle through populist media channels coupled with a desire to attain the intangible, played out in the composite portraits of the new 'intangible' collective.

This series provides a compelling testimony of the power of well-handled visual media to approach even the most complex moral issues in a multicultural society in London. Was this your goal?

The gaze of the subject was key in *Chasing Mirrors*, historically in my practice the eyes are windows of endearment to the soul best exemplified in 'Palwand#1' where a subject looks vacant but retains all the angst of expectation. I think we live in an exciting moment where the screen is the mediator of disparate worlds and ideas. Facebook, digital cameras etc. enable soft participation in contemporary visual culture, morality is by no means my calling or duty but highlighting how time is now negotiated. The transfer of ideas, images and information creates a more informed and fluid generation that critiques their current position through global devices and networks.

Does your choice to combine individuals' different facial characteristics into a single shot represent your personal view on diversity or is it an attempt to portray a utopian, post-ethnic ideal?

I think artists should be called utopians as they just turn the focus on the blur, what I mean by that is the issue around diversity in London is by no means a new concept, ride on a bendy bus and close your eyes and listen at 7pm you could be anywhere. But how do you articulate that common moment so that people take notice? A work.

Has urban London always been the background for your artistic life?

My parents came to London in the 1960s from Jamaica and my father always reminded me over Sunday dinner (which was the family's point of reflection) about times when renting private accommodation was problematic. Being the subject of attacks from Skinheads and Teddy Boys, they were not surprised at the signs displayed by landlords stating 'no Dogs, no Irish, and no Blacks!' This background has made an indelible impression of how I read images and re-appropriate my ideas. In my home as a child the food for the day was survival: you put on a suit of armour before school you take it off when you return, English on the outside Jamaica on the inside. That self preservation was the only fibre holding first-generation immigrants and rendering them unshakeable.

Do you view London as a political place?

Some people are born with privilege which is political, some born without choice and options again political and if you are fortunate to rise above the mire when you leave this place you will die with some! So those two points, one of entry and the other of departure, must reside in a space that some call environment and others call society - hence the conclusion. London is not exclusive to any major city, political by default.

If you were to create a portrait of the city of London, would it be an amalgamation of the collected memories of all of the cities that you have known?

London could be best described in two ways: coleslaw or salad bowl! Coleslaw is blended with pepper and mayonnaise to create what I perceive as a generic pulp. Salad bowl is very different where each ingredient maintains their identity and the difference is appreciated. To amalgamate London would lose that 'bendy bus' moment of serenity and escapism.