

New shades of black

"Identity politics has been done to death in the eighties."

- Senior curator in a large London public gallery

"Young Muslims don't do irony or playfulness."

- National arts administrator

Reactions to the politics that surround us do not always make for compelling art. Much of it can feel too earnest and 'on message.' The five artists represented in this exhibition respond to this challenge with wit and verve. They share a varied allegiance to the Muslim faith but would not necessarily recognise themselves as 'Muslim artists,' or even see their faith as one of their principal identifiers. Three of them live in the UK, one in Australia and another in Pakistan, — all three countries part of the 'coalition of the willing' in America's 'war on terror'. Their artistic concerns cannot help but reflect their lived reality — a reality they collide with every time they travel through an airport, where the colour of their passports can no longer eclipse the colour of their skin, or the linguistic origins of their names.

As the 'war against terror' cajoles politicians and media commentators into sacrificing logic and consistency of approach at the altar of political and rhetorical advantage, the brown-skinned are pushed into a hyper-sensitized version of the world, with heightened awareness of our place in it. The 'place' they occupy is defined in ways that a few years ago would not have been tolerated in a society that thought of itself as an advanced civilization. It is a claustrophobic space where everyone with a public voice speaks knowingly of a 'Muslim community,' with ready solutions for what needs to be done for their greater 'integration'. As if refugees from Somalia and Bosnia, third generation British citizens from the sub-continent and Kurds from Iraq have some intrinsic commonality that can surmount linguistic, cultural, social, economic, class, educational and racial differences in one long leap. This exhibition explores the modes of social exchange and confrontation that this claustrophobic tendency has spawned. Much of the work in this exhibition has been produced over the last three years, and captures with some prescience the ongoing tussle for belonging and identity that are headline news today.

Shezad Dawood's *Nation of Islam* — a shiny knuckle-duster set regally on a black velvet cushion— is a pithy encapsulation of the idea behind this exhibition. For the uninitiated, a knuckle-duster is a weapon of hand-to-hand combat, moulded out of a piece of metal. It fits around the knuckles and is "designed to deliver the force of punches through a smaller and harder contact area" resulting in

“increased likelihood of fracturing the victim’s bones on impact.¹” This particular knuckle-duster is distinctive in that it has a diamante inscription in Arabic emblazoned on its golden surface — “Allah”.

This work shares its title with the name of the controversial religious movement in the USA that gained notoriety in the 1950s and early 1960s through its most high profile recruits, Muhammad Ali and Malcolm X (before they left its fold to join mainstream Islam). This political Nation of Islam called for a separate nation state for its black followers, and believed that the offer of ‘integration’ into white America was a “deception...intended to prevent black people from realizing that the time in history has arrived for the separation from the whites of this nation.²” The knuckle-duster also recalls the raised fist salute of the Black Panthers³, etched in the world’s visual memory when athletics medal winners John Carlos and Tommie Smith raised their clenched fists during the American national anthem at the 1968 Summer Olympics in Mexico City.

Dawood’s work pushes us to see the parallels between racial oppression in the US in the middle of the 20th Century and what is happening in the UK (and indeed the Euro- American world) now. All that seems to have changed is the colour of the oppressed skin. Brown is the new black. But the quiet menace to Dawood’s work — one that hints at the inevitable reaction to unrelenting pressure and a sense of injustice, real or imagined — is balanced by the status of the shiny knuckle duster as a piece of ‘bling’ jewellery, both parodied and celebrated in urban youth culture. This neutering of the clenched fist of resistance by the corruptive influence of conspicuous consumption sets up opposing readings, and make Dawood’s work an object of simultaneous fascination and repulsion.

Yara el-Sherbini uses puns, verbal and visual, with a dry humour that tickles as well as tingles. In *A Demonstration*, she gives us a ‘How-to’ video, in Blue Peter style, manipulating a football, string, an empty toilet roll and pieces of household carpet and prayer rugs into our very own ‘carpet bombs.’ Her aptly titled installation, *Loaded Objects*, continues in this spirit of the DIY show by presenting a collection of ‘bombs’ she had made earlier.

In *Skit*, the visual puns continue. A photograph of a bit of black cloth tied around a skittle is blown up to life size. Sitting on the floor of the gallery it takes on a complete persona —a blank face framed by the *hijab*-like black cloth. The metaphor of the bowling pin, helpless in the path of the inevitable bowling ball, is both timely and preposterous. The very obvious staging and subsequent placement of this blown-up photograph underline the absurdity of the encounter. Through humour, the artist opens up an internal conversation with no determined end.

Informed by her experience as a sixth-form lecturer in inner city London, the narrative in Faiza Butt’s work is derived from journalistic photographs of celebrities in newspapers and magazines.

She fuses these with images of everyday characters from ethnic minorities—the balding corner shop owner with Madonna or the bearded young man sharing a juice with the Gallagher brothers—to create images of an awkward utopia.

Her method of working accentuates this effect. She uses felt tip pens to recreate images in tiny dots on architect's film, which she mounts on transparent Perspex blocks. On these carefully drawn surfaces she splatters enamel paint—a mocking of the abstract painting cliché. The works themselves are finely poised between painting and sculpture—an in-between format that amplifies the dislocations of her protagonists. In the *Justice League* she creates an imaginary band of bearded superheroes alternating between fiery preachers from today and European nobility from a different age. In profile they stare at us with all the solemn sense of occasion of the US presidential profiles at Mount Rushmore.

Melbourne-based Naeem Rana was born in Lahore, and trained, from the age of twelve, by his father in the discipline of *Lahori khat*, a regional style of Urdu calligraphy. Rana has supplemented this apprenticeship with art school training in Lahore and Melbourne, and creates digitally manipulated prints that fuse popular Punjabi themes — including film, poetry, phrases, slogans and text — with imagery sourced from consumer goods packaging. The dazzle of his work often conceals perspicacious insights into social and intercultural relations. He invites us to consider the ease with which cultural boundaries, represented by language and symbols, are crossed when power — usually in the form of commercial interests of global business — is being exercised. His fictitious firm of 'Heavenly Products' announces a new product in one of its mock advertisements: "New Freedom—100% imported from America."

Rana's use of Urdu text and culturally specific references, for work shown exclusively to Euro-American audiences, redeploys strategies of cultural imperialism. His privileging of viewers who can read Urdu and understand the references creates two different strands of viewers: those who can 'read' his works, and those who can 'see' them⁴.

Ayaz Jochio's cluster of thirty portraits highlights the superficiality of 'difference.' Working from a drawn self-portrait from which he has removed all facial hair, Jochio uses thirty copies of his 'bald' face as the backdrop for a series of portraits, adding just hair in ink, paint and pen to transform himself into figures including Karl Marx, Adolf Hitler, Amitabh Bachchan and Che Guevara.

Jochio invites audiences to repeat this exercise on further copies of his 'bald' face. His artistic project will be realised in the form of a book that mixes his portraits with those created by diverse audiences, from school children to art historians, in Japan, Pakistan, Germany and the UK. Sharing

the authorship of 'his' work reinforces the underlying theme of his overall project: allowing an audience to learn by doing, taking us back to early childhood where similar exercises first articulated our individual truths and prejudices.

Playful, thoughtful and laced with a lacerating wit, the works in this small exhibition take on the serious business of identity politics with a sense of humour — an enduring strategy in these testing times.

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1. Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Brass_knuckles
2. Elijah Muhammad, Message to the Blackman in America (Newport News, Virginia: United Brothers Communications Systems, 1965)
3. The Black Panthers Party was founded to further the American Civil Rights movement after the death of Malcolm X in 1965.
4. Notes towards the end of the catalogue can help the 'seers' read.