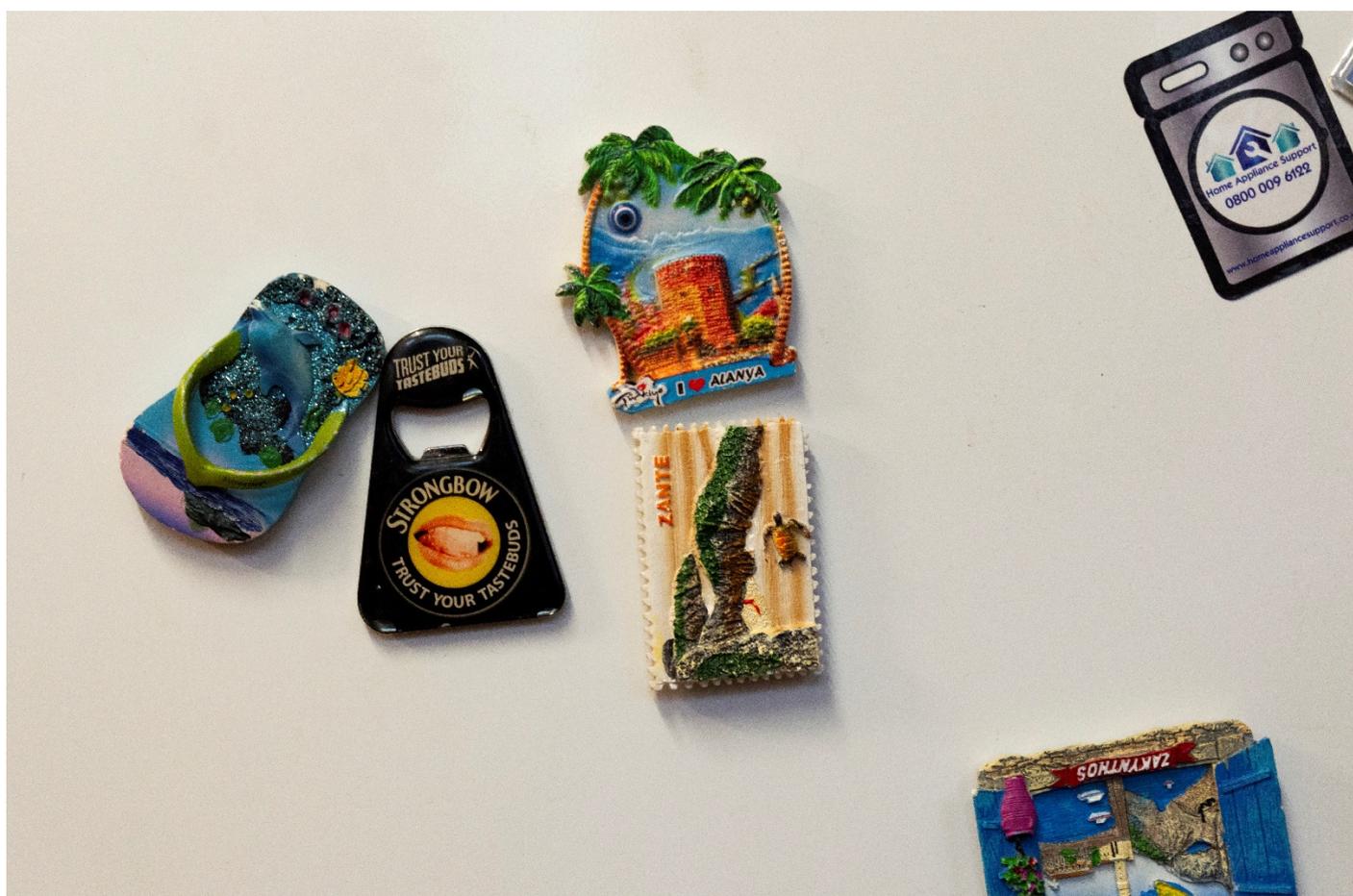


Ways of Belonging: Taste

An Ort Gallery offsite exhibition featuring Adam Neal, Asuf Ishaq, Nilupa Yasmin & Santhanha Nguyen



Level 2 Gallery
Birmingham Hippodrome
27 Feb - 29 May 2020

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You meet somebody new by chance in a public space. You get talking, they tell you about the school they went to, the occupations their parents had when they were a child and how they socialise at the weekend. Within just a few minutes it is possible to understand a lot about a person and the social class they belong to. You might believe that it does not matter, that class is no longer a signifier that distinguishes us from others, but there is one thing that still sets people in the UK apart: taste.

"Taste is an emotional business; working-class people often talk of a strong sense of community, and taste decisions are often made to demonstrate loyalty to the clan. Now that those communities are no longer held together by working in the same mine, mill or shipyard, call-centre workers or spray-tanners pledge allegiance to a locale, to their friends and family, through football, soap operas, bodybuilding, tattoos, hot cars, elaborate hairstyles and the ritual of dressing up for a Friday night on the town."

- Grayson Perry ¹

The British cultural workforce has a severe lack of workers with working class origins. Since "2010, this class crisis has deepened, with recent research emphasising that chronic issues of socio-economic under-representation persist."² Why are people from lower socio-economic backgrounds missing in the arts? The sector does not represent working class people and, worse, frequently alienates them. Without representation there can be no feeling of belonging. Working class people do not lack the ambition to work in the arts, rather it is a question of whether and how they can 'fit in'.

Birmingham is one of the most diverse cities in the country, with a rich demography and abundance of genders, religions, ethnic backgrounds and tastes. We must therefore approach a person's background in the context of its intersections with the host of their individual characteristics and life choices. How can the city's arts sector be rich and expansive if that sector actively excludes over a third of the working population? Is the possibility of belonging to this industry hindered further because of the intersectionality of a person's characteristics? Do identity politics mean the chances of access are diminished even more?

"You don't have to be from an economically privileged background to work in cultural jobs but coming from an upper middle class background offers significant advantages for people struggling to make it. As research shows, cultural tastes play an important role in getting into upper-middle class occupations. Hiring can be a form of cultural matching, excluding those who do not have the shared tastes of specific social groups."³

This exhibition questions the issue of socioeconomic representation in the cultural sector through the work of four artists working and living in and around Birmingham: Adam Neal, Asuf Ishaq, Nilupa Yasmin and Santhanha Nguyen. They question the concept of privilege, share their personal stories and offer polar views of representation. They become activist-artists who challenge the bias of the industry whilst also acting as role models to young people growing up in Birmingham with similar life experiences, offering us all alternative ways of seeing their city.

Adam Neal

Having spent his formative years living in the residential area of Northfield, Birmingham, Adam Neal has witnessed first-hand the changing face of industry and the way in which this has altered social class categorisation in the UK. Growing up in a traditional working-class family, he has witnessed specifically how the working-class has adapted to contemporary societal changes such as the advancement of technology, and the changing shift from production to consumption.

Adam's work in this exhibition investigates contemporary working-class culture and the tastes embedded within it. The photographs advocate the probing of current working class signifiers, especially objects, their ephemeral nature and how they can be preserved or lost.

Asuf Ishaq

Asuf Ishaq is interested in the invisibility of slow violence against the environment and the post-colonial body, a violence that occurs continuously through phases of disruptions of life cycles of non-human and human life.

Asuf's re-appropriation of the game Snakes and Ladders is a new work for the exhibition. The original Hindu version of the game, which traces Asuf's cultural heritage and was appropriated by the British Empire, had more vices on the journey and more snakes to avoid. The Imperialists created a playing field with an equal number of vices and virtues which enforces a competitive environment and economy, but in reality some people will be left behind. Asuf's version of the game is a take on the art world using text and illustration. The title *Economy of Visibility* describes the scenarios of success and failure as an artist.

Nilupa Yasmin

"My identity plays such an important part in the art I am making and how it is perceived, both educating people about my culture and heritage as well as my own journey into self-discovery. I have to create a place for myself as a British Muslim Bengali woman in the arts."

Nilupa's work shows intricately woven archival images combined into self-portraits, incorporating bold statements made from her headscarf to her mother's wedding saree. In this, each image tells a story of her journey into self-discovery. *Grow me a Waterlily* dwells in the space between expectations and traditions by offering an exploration into the self, the home and the idea of belonging. Artist Nilupa Yasmin is present in her work both visually and physically, portraying her identity through the understanding of craft and the politicised notion of fabric.

Santhanha Nguyen

Focusing on landscapes, Santhanha Nguyen explores psychogeography; how geographical locations can have an effect on an individual's emotions and behaviours. She creates observational paintings that address the ever changing nature of the inner-city landscape and urban communities; looking at the ways in which their geographies are imagined, lived, and contested.

Santhanha's artworks look at places deemed to be working class environments and subverts them in a way that challenges existing stereotypes.

¹ "Taste is woven into our class system" by Grayson Perry (Telegraph Article)

² "Socio Economic Inclusion and Diversity in the Arts - A Toolkit for Employers" by Jerwood Arts

Associated Events

Artist-led Tour of the Exhibition
28 March 2020, 2pm

Join the artists Adam Neal, Asuf Ishaq, Nilupa Yasmin and Santhanha Nguyen as well as curator Josephine Reichert for a guided tour through the exhibition. The artists will offer insights into their working methods and research and answer questions in this informal meeting with the audience.

Free to attend; booking via Box Office essential.

Ort Gallery

This exhibition is curated by Josephine Reichert, Artistic Director of Ort Gallery, an artist-led gallery in Balsall Heath. Ways of Belonging is an ongoing series of off-site exhibitions by Ort Gallery offering emerging talent professional development opportunities in renowned organisations and supporting the partner organisation to improve their representation and reach new audiences.

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