

CHISENHALE GALLERY

RESEARCH

'NOW LET US SHIFT'

AMRITA DHALLU

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'NOW LET US SHIFT'

INTRODUCTION BY AMRITA DHALLU

Now let us shift has been devised as part of my role as the 2018–19 Curatorial Assistant: Commissions at Chisenhale Gallery, with the support of Ellen Greig, Curator: Commissions, as Research Project Editor. The project is part of *Chisenhale Research*, which is a new strand of programming and archival research that reflects on the gallery's rich history of artists' commissions and ground-breaking exhibitions since it was founded in 1982. This programme emphasises new approaches to interpreting previous commissions and attempts to understand how they are shaped historically.

Through a series of transcribed conversations with Chisenhale Gallery programme participants [Lubaina Himid](#), [Lydia Ourahmane](#) and [Mandy El-Sayegh](#), this document develops an intergenerational discourse around the creativity, wellbeing and labour of women artists of colour. The premise of this ongoing body of research is to foreground how curators and other art workers can better support the artistic output of women artists of colour, who still remain amongst the most marginalised practitioners within the art world. As a curator, who is a third-generation immigrant based in the UK, I was interested in encouraging each artist to explore how our subjectivities and inherited histories affect our individual practices and professional ambitions within institutional environments.

The project began with the practice of Lubaina Himid in mind, focusing on her work in the 1980s and 1990s that addresses the identities and struggles of black and Asian women artists, as well as highlighting their critical approaches to Western art history and other imperial institutional structures. The basis of our conversation was to better understand Himid's strategies of collectivity, which strengthens her exchanges with her peers. In our conversation, Himid also sets out a generous and clear framework for curators to follow when thinking about care within working relationships with artists.

I continued the investigation with contemporaries Lydia Ourahmane and Mandy El-Sayegh. Ourahmane and I discuss issues of displacement and reconciliation, as explored in her 2018 Chisenhale Gallery commission, as well as the importance for artists of colour to set out specific working criteria when operating professionally. El-Sayegh and I unpack the underlying motives, processes and habits within her work in relation to her own personal biography, as well as the challenges that these relations pose when creating new ground for artistic discourse.

What emerges from these three conversations is the complexity and contradiction inherent in working through histories of migrant communities, and how this is often magnified when they are transposed into an art institutional setting. This publication acknowledges a history of institutional racism and systemic exclusion of women of colour artists, whilst foregrounding models for improved support structures within the art world. Ultimately, this project addresses how 'care' can move beyond a performative gesture in order to become embedded within the curatorial practice.

CHISENHALE RESEARCH INTERVIEW: LUBAINA HIMID

Lubaina Himid is an artist who lives and works in Preston, UK. Working with painting, print and sculpture, Himid's practice explores issues relating to black identity and historical representations of the African diaspora, whilst challenging institutional conditions of visibility. For her Chisenhale Gallery commission *Ballad of the Wing* (1989), Himid devised an installation that encompassed plinths, paintings and sculpture, in which visitors received a gold credit card that proved their membership to the installation, titled Wing Museum.

Recent solo exhibitions include *Our Kisses are Petals*, Baltic, Gateshead; *Navigation Charts*, Spike Island, Bristol; and *Invisible Strategies*, Modern Art Oxford, among many others. She is Professor of Contemporary Art at the University of Central Lancashire, Preston, and also leads the interdisciplinary visual art research project, *Making Histories Visible*, with Christine Eyene. Himid was awarded the Turner Prize in 2017.

This conversation focuses on Himid's practice in the 1980s and 1990s, which centred on her collaborations and support of black women artists.¹ Responding to challenges faced when working with institutions, Himid provides guidelines for integrating care into relationships and exchanges between artists and curators.

Amrita Dhallu: *In the text Mapping: A Decade of Black Women Artists 1980–1990 (1990), you state that 'being a black woman artist in the eighties was a very public thing.'² What did you mean by this?*

Lubaina Himid: I meant that the label 'black woman artist' was a statement about a strategy as well as description of my everyday life. The title invites discussion about the politics of race and representation rather than conversation about aesthetics and narrative.

AD: *I'm interested in the legacy of your coalition with black female artists, which emerged in the 1980s. With these women, you curated shows and produced publications to reposition the black female presence from the margins to the centre of art historical debate. What are your thoughts on its legacy?*

¹ During the 1980s, the term 'black' was used as a self-defining political marker that aligned artists of Asian and African descent due to shared histories of colonial subjugation.

² Himid, Lubaina, *Passion: Discourses on Blackwomen's Creativity*, ed. Maud Sulter (Hebden Bridge: Urban Fox Press, 1990).

LH: It's hard to know whether there is or will be a legacy – but we seem to have given a number of young creative women the faint hope that some groundwork has been done and that there is, at least in the UK and the US, little excuse for reticence when acknowledgement for significant cultural contribution is required.

AD: The artist and writer Maud Sulter, a frequent collaborator of yours, spoke about the pain of being written out of art history. She said, 'there is no safety in collusion with those who want to suppress our art and suppress our voices.' Did her words affect the way in which you work, particularly when collaborating with institutions?

LH: Her words were always quite negative, even though her work was very strong. I've tried to be as positive as possible throughout my career and work with museums and galleries in my own way. My strategy is to build relationships and broker conversations, seek fairness and expect attentive efficiency from curators and art historians wherever possible.

AD: Often in your writing, and also more recently in your 2017 Turner Prize speech, you have spoken about the inclusion and sudden exclusion of black women artists in the art world. What do you think the emotional and mental impacts of the 'wilderness years' during the 1990s were for these artists?

LH: The 1990s were quite difficult because although we were making and showing work in galleries and museums both here and in the US, it wasn't really acknowledged in a public way. No one was buying or collecting it and, although some very eminent art historians – notably Griselda Pollock – were writing about the work, the impact was quite hidden. Many artists died, gave up or became embroiled in pointless arguments with mainstream organisations.

AD: What kept you driven during this period?

LH:

- A group of art historians interested in the work;
- Some curators (not in London, of course) who kept showing the work – in the north of England mostly;
- My teaching job in the north of England, which I loved;
- My studio in Preston overlooking a beautiful park.

AD: What does 'care' in an art institution look like to you?

LH:

- Listen to the artist;
- Look at the work;
- Ask about the making;
- Consider the cost of production;
- Read everything you can find about the work;
- Introduce the artist to interested colleagues;
- Talk to artists in public situations;
- Think about how to help them with small publications;
- Keep in touch after the exhibition.

AD: I'm interested in types of unspoken labour, often emotional, that are involved when working with female artists of colour. Do you find yourself in the position of 'educating' curators about the issues faced by black women, so that they understand the work better?

LH: Yes. I'm always banging on about how curators should treat all artists better, but of course black women do face a slightly bumpier ride than most. See my grumpy list above about care – the fact is that they don't really listen to me.

What keeps me going now? People like you – clever, determined and kind.

Interviewed by Amrita Dhallu, Curatorial Assistant: Commissions, Chisenhale Gallery, conducted via email between 6 February and 1 March 2019. Chisenhale Research Project Editor: Ellen Greig, Curator: Commissions.

CHISENHALE RESEARCH INTERVIEW: LYDIA OURAHMANE

Lydia Ourahmane is an artist based in London, UK and Algiers, Algeria. Informed by personal encounters, Ourahmane's work raises questions on systems of exchange and dissemination. Her commission *The you in us* (2018) – comprising of installation, sculpture and sound – built on her on-going engagement with the emotional, psychological and political charge of material and place. Her work has been included in the New Museum Triennial 2018, New York; the 15th Istanbul Biennial; and exhibited at Jameel Arts Centre, Dubai and Kunstverein München, Munich, among many others.

Using Ourahmane's Chisenhale Gallery commission as a starting point, this conversation explores issues of marginalisation and belonging, and draws focus on the necessity of care when working with an artist to produce new work.

Amrita Dhallu: I'm keen to understand how you explore personal biography and familial trauma in your work, as one of the interests in this research project is how inherited history influences some women of colour's artistic practice. In your 2018 Chisenhale Commission, The you in us your paternal history is addressed, notably in the work Droit de Sang (Blood Right) (2018) which includes a series of recently uncovered documents, such as military and identity papers, that belonged to your grandfather.

Lydia Ourahmane: I think there are two main aspects of trauma; one that you directly experience, and one that you inherit. Within this work, I would say that I am dealing with inherited trauma, exploring what it means to be caught in the aftermath of what occurred within my father's familial history. Obviously, this history has always been there and it has been felt in my own lifetime, but when I was developing the Chisenhale commission I felt that I was supported enough, and therefore able to interrogate these more personal topics in my work. There was no distraction from that. Although this experience was relatively confrontational, it resuscitated these dormant legacies that previously had only existed as memory, or tales of word of mouth.

I was talking to Luke [Willis Thompson] about this recently and he asked me if I feel like I owe something to my ancestry. I asked if what he meant to ask was if I feel like I have to do them justice. We also talked about our relationship to inherited trauma and how we feel like we have to embody, rewrite, or work through this in our own ways, often in our practices. However, I don't think working through personal narratives in my practice is entirely trying to work through trauma.

Instead, it is a question of whether I felt like I was working in a space and in a situation that cared enough about the work, and about me, in order for me to be able to be honest.

AD: For me, the commission seemed like a journey that allowed you to understand the formation of your own personal identity in relation to your grandfather, but also in relation to your home town of Oran, Algeria. Did your artistic practice feel like the most immediate way to explore the layers within your ancestry?

LO: It felt very revealing, because the language that my work deals with – or had dealt with before this exhibition – was completely controlled by me. Previous works of mine had dealt with stories that I had understood from experience or from very close encounters, but it was never a question of bringing my personal history and my own body into the equation. I could negotiate it from a relative distance – therefore, it was not painful.

AD: Through making the commission, do you feel like you have sufficiently dealt with everything that emerged whilst you were confronting your personal history?

LO: I don't have anything that I can cross-reference it with. It is a continual process and I am still in that process. When you work with very personal histories, or with materials that force you to confront those narratives, histories and legacies within yourself, the first step is to be able to confront it, or to be able to want to speak about it – that was really the biggest thing for me. And that work, perhaps, is not fully done yet.

In general, I really don't enjoy the process of revealing. Perhaps it is challenging for me as it is weighted with other expectations. I have spent so long not talking about myself. For example, when I moved to England from Algeria when I was a child, I remember not even talking about where I came from. I wanted to appear 'normal', so I didn't discuss things that might make me seem abnormal.

AD: Do you think that this commission has encouraged you to become more open?

LO: Yes, totally.

AD: I am interested in the role that healing plays in your work. Included in your exhibition was a floor-based sound work, Paradis (2018), which comprises of a composition that vibrated across the

gallery floor. You have described this work as being ‘played directly onto the body, creating a “trance-like” state of calm’.¹

LO: It is interesting that you ask about healing. It firstly requires a lot of time, in addition to a willingness and openness. It is very physical, not just mental. There are so many ways of healing, but the crucial part of that is the mind understanding the body (and the other way around), and for music and sound to initiate this union. The immediacy of sound and its absolute presence confronts the body first, which means there is a cognitive delay. I am interested in the possibility of collective healing through listening.

AD: Why was it important for you to create this space of calmness? I interpret this gesture as you carving out a space for personal healing.

LO: Making the sound piece was an incredibly regenerative process. The work itself comprises of field recordings of landscapes and events, which felt necessary to record during my time in Oran. The bringing together of these recordings was a tense experience, particularly as it brought to the fore my fraught relationship to the land. It was the process of transposing those sounds into a different space (the gallery) that peeled back the chaos that was at the heart of the recordings. Somehow there was a second chance.

AD: Do you think that art institutions and art educational frameworks lend themselves to a space of embodied healing?

LO: No.

AD: So how did you navigate that?

LO: I felt like everyone who worked with me on this Chisenhale commission cared and, therefore, I could also care.

AD: Do you think that the commission would have worked if it was presented elsewhere?

LO: No way.

AD: What is clear is that the people who work with you and support you are really instrumental during this process. Do you think that a supportive nature emerges from how an art institution operates?

1 Ourahmane, L and Greig, E. (2018). ‘Interview with Lydia Ourahmane’, [online], Chisenhale Interviews, Available at: https://chisenhale.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/LydiaOurahmane_ChisenhaleGallery_Interview-1.pdf [Accessed 7 Apr. 2019]

LO: Yes, of course. I couldn't open my mind to someone in this way if I didn't feel like this. I don't think conversations around your work should be removed from conversations about you. When people want to meet and only ask me about what I'm working on next, I am not convinced that they are interested in anything outside of that. So, I tell them what I am working on next and we leave it at that, if there is no other interest or incentive.

AD: My mind is very much preoccupied with the environment in which the work is produced, which includes you, your health, your mental state (and that of your collaborators), your relationships with others – all of those factors are intrinsic to artistic production. If there is a problem with all of those things then that will ultimately affect the work.

LO: After working on this and witnessing what is possible in a collaboration of this sort where people are helping you to produce something which is difficult, I've realised that it is super rare.

AD: How important are collaborative relationships within your practice?

LO: As I have gained more experience, I realise that what is essential to my practice is collaboration. Collaborative work gives birth to a meaningful way of connecting the most disparate modes, operations and systems, which in turn produces new ways of experiencing the world.

In my previous work, *The Third Choir* (2014), which comprises of 20 empty Naftal oil barrels that were exported from Algeria, I worked alongside various parties. For example, the Ministry of Culture and the Customs Department, as well as people I knew well, were involved in exporting these barrels. My practice enables me to supersede barriers and categories that are put in place to separate people, which enables working relationships that are not based around hierarchy.

AD: What kind of personal challenges did you face whilst working on the Chisenhale commission?

LO: It was really hard for me making the show because it made me realise that I attach myself and my entire existence to Oran, a space where I grew up as a child and is no longer my 'home'. I was only involved in this context by being related to the land by birth, by blood, as well as by history. I, myself – as who I am and who I have become as a body – do not belong there anymore. I suppose that was the underlying work that was happening beneath this practice, which

required a lot of emotional labour.

AD: Were you expecting to feel like this when you returned back to London after your time in Oran?

LO: I go back to Oran all the time, but the weird thing was that this time felt very different. I arrived there with a different perspective – one that related to a process of making work.

I am currently moving to Algiers because I don't think I can be in Oran as an adult. That space is embellished with a familial understanding of that context. It is very difficult to negotiate and establish your own terms and your own way of existing there.

AD: When you returned to London, did you feel you had a different relationship to the place that you called home?

LO: That is partly the reason that I think I need to move back to Algeria because I don't think it is possible to love from afar. I think distance goes two ways: it is not just up to you to negotiate that distance, as distance also understands you. Although I am fully aware that I can create notions of belonging in my own mind, where I think I can belong to a specific place, it can never truly exist as this 'in-betweenness' is really my state of being.

AD: Do you feel like you need some kind of anchor that you call home in order to operate?

LO: In an ideal world, yes. However, the idea of only being in one place scares me, as I have been so used to this 'in-between' state that, for me, that is normal. Perhaps, the idea of home is continuously moving. Being an artist offers me that privilege, but it is also weighted and can often be disorientating. I feel completely in free-fall.

Working in Oran and then making a show in London put a lot of things into perspective. After working on this commission, I felt I would be approached by galleries to 'slot' into their programmes. I could see the impulse behind that approach; for example, that there may have been diversity quotas to fill and, out of convenience, they wanted me to work with them. Having this shallow level of conversation with galleries allowed me to see the machine of the art world for what it is.

AD: What did you see in that machine that you didn't like?

LO: I find that there is a lack of care about the wider context from

which the work is produced. It makes you reconsider, ‘what do you care about?’.

AD: Do you think that is a question you should pose –

LO: – at work, at all times? Yes, of course. As an artist, saying no is a part of that.

AD: Should that be your criteria when you decide to work with an institution, that you should ask them, first and foremost, what is it that they care about, as some sort of litmus test?

LO: Yes, and I do ask people that if they want to work together. I ask them what is it about. I don’t want to engage in some loose discourse – one that centres on the self-gratification of their position in relation to your work and what your work can do for the institution that it is upholding. Some institutions mean well but their structure proves itself incapable of handling what it is that they set out to do.

AD: Do you have a specific answer in mind when you ask your potential collaborators what they care about?

LO: I want to hear that they care outside the realm of the production of art as that is not the only reason I continue to make work.

Interview by Amrita Dhallu, Curatorial Assistant: Commissions, Chisenhale Gallery, conducted on 23 October 2018, Chisenhale Gallery, London. Chisenhale Research Project Editor: Ellen Greig, Curator: Commissions.

CHISENHALE RESEARCH INTERVIEW: MANDY EL-SAYEGH

Mandy El-Sayegh is an artist based in London, UK. Comprising of large-scale painting, works on paper and object-based installations, El-Sayegh's work explores the human body, from which a broader interrogation of the political, the psychological and the linguistic can emerge. Her commission *Cite Your Sources* (2019) brings together principle elements from an ongoing series of works to explore themes relating to representation, abstraction and subjectivity. Her work has been shown at SAVVY Contemporary, Berlin; Lehmann Maupin, New York; The Mistake Room, Guadalajara; and the Sharjah Biennial, among many others. In 2017 she was shortlisted for the Max Mara Art Prize for Women.

This conversation explores El-Sayegh's use of the body within her work in relation to familial and inherited histories, as well as the difficulties of creating new artistic discourse within institutional environments that encourage artists to perform racial identities.

Amrita Dhallu: I am interested in the various ways that the human body features in your installations and paintings. Why is the body so central to your work?

Mandy El-Sayegh: One of the many entry points to my work is the socio-economic ground of emigrating to the UK. In the 1990s, my mum moved from Sharjah to London as a midwife, where there were better economic prospects. My mum had come from a really hard-working background, and previously had worked on a rubber tapping tree plantation where there was abject poverty. She was the only one in her family that was really ambitious and did everything she possibly could to get out of there – she travelled from Malaysia to the Middle East as a nurse before graduating as a midwife. She's always climbing, and in that sense she's the only one in her generation of her family to do that. Responding to a call for midwives to work in the NHS, she left Sharjah for the UK, where we ended up staying in nurses' accommodation. My parents, siblings and I were all living in one room and there was always an anxiety that there was not enough space.

Although I loved my childhood, I felt like an alien that didn't perform 'correctly'. This failure of identification was largely language-based, but not having a steady grounding developed into a pervasive anxiety. This anxiety manifested in a fear of my own body.

As a child, I started getting interested in anatomy books that I found in the library. I felt this pacifying kind of relief when I saw a diagram of

the body. I felt that if I could pinpoint where the source of sensations was in the body – like cause and effect – which made the anxiety go away. I would think, ‘Okay, pain comes from the stomach or it comes from the intestines or the digestive system...’. There is something quite amazing about having this body with all of these infinite, yet fleeting, sensations, but the anatomy book is a way to reduce it down to diagrams, which is quite a violent action. I see this as abstraction.

Another early entry point for the use of the body in my work is a shared medical language between my mum being a midwife and my dad’s ongoing chronic illness. I had this feeling that there was no separation between my body and theirs. Living with this figure that is always ill means that you have a perpetual proximity to death, as well as a complex and intimate experience of their body in relation to your own.

AD: Where is your father from?

MES: My father is originally from Gaza in Palestine. He had the same experience generationally as his father, who was also very ill. I remember my father saying that all of the siblings would pray for his release. My grandfather would always be in this state of being – a father-but-non-father, a presence. Then I thought that, actually, this is how I feel about Palestine itself.

AD: You mentioned earlier that you’ve visited Palestine at various stages in your life. How do you relate your recent visit to Palestine, the first as an adult, with this ‘non-father’ presence?

MES: Through revisiting part of my identity that I had not fully come to terms with, I was able to relate my father’s situation to a wider sense of the place. I feel Palestinian, yet I don’t feel Arab. In Palestine, I experienced the effects of denying or choosing not to confront familial trauma, which impacts generations. Those feed into the fragile state of the socio-historical landscape of Palestine that I connected to.

My father never spoke about his relationship to Palestine, and I therefore relate his chronic illness to this unspoken past. I guess when you don’t talk about pain it gets pushed into the body – literally expressed in the figure of my father with his illness, like a slow death. When I visited Palestine as an adult, I realised that my father’s behaviour was not unique. There was an overall silencing of the daily violence experienced by the local population. I relate chronic slow death to this invisible existence. There is no acknowledgement of post-traumatic stress disorder in Gaza, as there is no ‘post’. There cannot be a period of mourning – there will never be resolve, only a continual

erasure. This is reflected in my mother too, in how she cares for him and how she structurally holds a family together, warding off the continual threat of loss.

AD: I have heard you mention that you must enter into an ‘immersion space’ when you begin working. Can you elaborate on what you mean by this?

MES: The way I use this phrase is two-fold. In one instance, I am using this term to explain my previous position as a care worker – which is a profession that becomes all-consuming in your life if you lack the right support. In my mother’s case, she was doing care work in double shifts, and then there was literally no time to eat; there was no self-care involved due to a practical limitation. My experience of care work was nowhere near that level of intensity. However, it reflects the way I prioritise the maintenance of the body. After graduating, I thought creating art wasn’t going to be a realistic path to pursue as a career. So, becoming a carer who looked after young people – some of whom were non-verbal, some required physical aid – seemed like a logical step.

When I eventually developed my art practice and stopped working in care, I experienced another side of the ‘immersion space’. Here, I carve out a space to get rid of inhibitions and self-judgement about how indulgent it is to go into a purely formal zone of colour and materials. My partner has opened me up to giving myself this space to practice. As a carer you also need to give yourself space, so I see the two as interrelated. I hate using the term ‘self-care’ because it’s so often used in the wrong ways; I call it giving myself that space.

AD: If you don’t have that space, it can become too overwhelming. Your vision becomes dictated by anxiety, especially around the future and the state of the health of your parents. That’s not a way of living, let alone working.

MES: Or you’re living as an auxiliary part to your family. That’s my nightmare.

All of these delineations and separations of space that I must create within my practice relate to my mother as both a midwife and a carer for my family. All of these things are part of a kind of survival mentality, which create other ways of being. These all appear as metaphors for intergenerational trauma – the one where we don’t have a space to talk about it, leading you to find creative ways to do so.

AD: I am interested in artist Kader Attia’s research surrounding

'repair', where he talks about art and its ability to restore the fragmented society that constructs the contemporary world.² Do you think art is a site where we, as second and third generation immigrants, can 'repair' the trauma and memory passed down to us from previous generations?

MES: With the intergenerational transmission of trauma, time becomes warped and doubt severely clouds our experience. Trauma does not derive from the event per se, as you did not experience it directly, instead it comes from a 'psychic' event. It is marked by a hypocrisy in the conspiratorial silence that surrounds it – those with PTSD are said to be more affected by this hypocrisy, or gaslighting, than the event itself. If you are able to symbolise this silence, this is when it can enter culture. Through this action, it becomes legitimised as a historical event or even a site for mourning.

The making visible of the wound is a site for work to be done. Only from there do we get the space to repair, as the acknowledgment is still yet to come; events are still yet to be recorded, so memory is still being denied. Representation here is at stake, which is the nodal point between politics and the visual arts. I do, however, subscribe to Attia's idea of injury – that the bodily fissures should be celebrated, as opposed to covered, in order to serve as a confrontational power to engender action and discussion.

I like to call the work I do a 'recombinant practice'. My father's illness has meant he has to become extra vigilant of his health. If one organ fails, there are secondary and tertiary complications – you are forced to continuously recalibrate the machine. This body, this vulnerability, has a power and knowledge through its experience and necessity to adapt. This body is situated in a liminal space that is predisposed to creativity. What my work really examines is how a body in states of duress expresses its agency when so much is taken from it. This 'recombinant practice', through rewriting with fragments, becomes a proposition that can function as proof of existence and must continue, especially in the face of radical negation of facts and suffering. Art is a site for this work, through engaging with the poetic potential of re-writing, as well as because of its revered place in culture, which is important for legitimising invisible subjects.

AD: *Your methodology is an extremely visceral practice – one that allows you to display a conflation of the bodily, the personal and the*

2 Attia, K (2013). 'Repair: Architecture, Reappropriation and the Body Repaired' [online] Kader Attia. Available at: <http://kaderattia.de/repair-architecture-reappropriation-and-the-body-repaired/> [Accessed 8 Apr. 2019]

political. Does this methodology become a place of healing?

MES: I think that what I discover is much more ambiguous than that. It's not like it's a space of healing but it becomes another space, a space away from. It's sublimation, because it gives you satisfaction and that satisfaction is the fragmented body. It makes sense in this condition and therefore it is legitimated in the symbolic space. All the places you've failed, or you feel anxious in, in bits, there is now a 'gestalt' there – a whole. Even though it's a delusional one, it is still held up by culture. What is revered the most? Unfortunately, the answer is language, through which you legitimise yourself.

AD: *Is that your ambition – to seek assimilation in the art world? Do you feel that your use of, and reference to, Western art historical motifs such as the grid are a part of this legitimisation process?*

MES: It is both. In one sense, an artist doesn't always know what they do, it's an impulse and it's good to stay in that impulsive place. I don't think I operate strategically, but you do realise that something is afforded a certain space – or recognition – because of its form, like painting. I always rejected painting, but I am aware that painting has afforded me this space. How am I allowed to do what I want by using an already legitimised space? There is also an issue of recognition. The thing you never got that you are always striving towards. Once you are 'invited' into this space, you can recalibrate its terms.

There is a quote from Julia Kristeva from *Strangers to Ourselves* (1988), where she is referring to assimilation and the foreigner in French culture. She states, 'such a state of affairs gives rise to two opposite attitudes on the part of the foreigner, either attempts at all costs to merge.' I am interested in this word 'merge', which is one of the many things that I explore in my painting series, *Net-Grid* (2010 – onwards). When I think about 'mergy-ness', I lose all the context of the background of the paintings, which are overlaid with painted grids. It loses its differentiation. It's hard to know where the layers of content are sourced from – it's hard to separate all those layers. The quote, for me, explores how historical processes and historical oppressions have been linked to a formal language.

AD: *Let's go back to the portrayal of the body in your work, often comprising fragments of anatomical drawings and clippings from news media and pornography. It appears that the body is caught in oppressive gendered and racialised systems. Do you often feel caught within these same systems whilst working in the art world?*

MES: Yes, but this can be played with. The bodies that are ‘caught’ in the web aren’t simply a comment or invitation for moral reading. They figure as a persisting problem, as they resist being fully integrated into the ‘ground’ upon which they are laid. They become stains in an otherwise pure abstraction. Who has the right to abstraction in their work? This question invites a re-reading of visual culture in the broadest sense, from the Abstract Expressionists in the 1960s to the visual framing of marginalised populations in the tabloids today.

A lot of my bodies of work attempt to address this question, for example in my series *White Ground* (2016 – onwards). As a painter you prime a surface and that’s an important part of the work. It is the initial process of making a work and it requires a lot of time. No one talks about that as a physical act. Traditionally, it’s a physical white ground from which everything attains meaning in painting. Although the enquiry of *White Ground* is very formal, conceptually it is linked to the invention of whiteness as communicated by the political commentator Ash Sarkar. She was talking about the systems of categorisation in history and how these are a composite of processes through which we have come to this idea of ‘whiteness’ – this vague idea that has happened through these modes of domination.³ Sarkar was talking about having to contain the powers of the Ottoman-Turk Empire when Christendom failed, so the leaders placed a system on top of the previous one – this was when the racialisation of whiteness happened, and happened again throughout many points in history. It was a cumulative process. We are at the point now where we see whiteness as a neutral space and it’s the norm; the background that retains all meaning and objectivity. This white ground in my work is simultaneously an abstract space and an accumulation of materials.

It’s interesting because another big question in my practice is how I talk about these things without going into biography. How can I do the work of resistance without that narrative?

AD: *I am interested in the term ‘cultural assimilation’. It implies that your foreign body becomes whole and is complete when assimilated, but if it can’t, is your body always going to feel fragmented? Is there a way to simultaneously resist assimilation and attain wholeness?*

MES: I would like to think that this is what art is. I interpret Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961) to say that there is an anger on the part of the foreigner that constitutes culture itself. That becomes

3 Sarkar, A. and Niscanioglu, N (2016). ‘The Invention of Whiteness’, [online], Novara Media, Available at: <https://soundcloud.com/novaramedia/the-invention-of-whiteness> [Accessed 8 Apr. 2019]

the work of resistance; the frustration becomes a creative endeavour. This creative practice constitutes the culture for the land you are inhabiting. By acknowledging that this antagonism is at the core of making culture and keeping this feeling, it can be put into play.

To actually think about this in terms of representation and how it works in the visual field is another thing I am very interested in. Derek Hook, a lecturer who reads through Fanon, talks about the black ‘body-in-pieces’.⁴ I don’t know much about this, but it is really interesting in relation to my work: the sexualised body, the terrorist body is a ‘body-in-pieces’ under states of duress. A body that is subjected to being just its pure materiality – a form of meat. Then there is the cerebral subject, which is not a body; it is a subject that is very different to a body, like an abstract space. I relate this to painting, again, and to abstraction. When the meat is abstracted from this and becomes a subject, you are allowed the cerebral space. If you are a terrorist and you’re white it’s as if you are not a terrorist, you’re someone with mental health problems.

AD: If we return to this pressure of speaking about biography that you mentioned earlier, do you feel when working professionally this can sometimes be exploited? If this is the case, how do you protect your agency?

MES: When entering into the art world, my identity often becomes pigeon-holed into a very specific thing in terms of where it goes and which discourse it belongs to, whether that is feminist or post-colonial theory and so on. But my practice is also attempting to write its own discourses. We’re building it as we’re doing it. We can use all those processes of thought, but we’re actually engaged in a modelling process now, trying to build this space, which is an attempt to move through and beyond these areas. This can be really tough. There is a tendency to fall into the trap of focusing on identity politics, yet it is the paradigm shift in a practice that I am interested in, which is not reducible to the themes or ideas that intersect it.

I think there is violence within pre-existing categorisations, and you are meant to slot in through tokenism into these places that are pre-determined spots for you. You have your little place and you don’t interfere with other discourses which have their own hegemonic order. I think the artist has a part to play in that separation. We, as people of colour, are often asked to talk about our biography. It’s different here, with you, because we’re talking about a very specific interest around

⁴ Hook uses this term to reference the black body in states of destruction, which he recognises as a motif, stemming from the white imagination, that is a common feature in racist humour and mainstream media.

the politics around care work within curatorial practice.

In terms of its symbolic integration, it is still early on in my practice. There has not been a lot that has been written about it, so I am in a good place where I can partly control and maintain a resistance to that reading that is waiting to dissolve its complexity. You can easily end up performing that ethnicity, that otherness, because you feel that is the only way that you become legitimate. You have to be resolute and maintain that level of complexity that your practice is truly concerned with. Inhabit that persistent problem, and it is that persistence that is the resistance.

AD: I often find myself discussing with peers that I have never felt so racialised before entering into the environment of the art world. The feeling is extended to artists, who are offered visibility, yet these conditions of visibility are often violent in themselves.

MES: It's like Adam and Eve – you suddenly know that you are naked. I remember the smallest incident: a crit in art school, where I brought in all my stuff to create an immersive space but did not give a backstory, and was told in not so many words that it was incoherent as conditions of display that were appropriate for reading art. Funnily enough, when I gave insight into the sources of the specific objects from my home, there was an acceptance of my work because of the familial context and biography. It's such a minor gesture but it tells you that these sensibilities are not what is recognised here without certain conditions.

AD: I think that is one of the massive problems. Whose responsibility is it to start a process towards change?

MES: Well, we're more aware of it so, unfortunately, it's more work for us, and also for art institutions. From my experience it has always been from here – from this exchange – and I can only do as much as I can. The least that we can do is acknowledge that there is violence here. You have to work on acknowledgement and then you can build. You can't build from nothing because what is the foundation?

AD: Would you like curators to acknowledge this before assessing the aesthetics of your work?

MES: The more I reflect on this, the more I feel that the acknowledgement in some institutional spaces will never come. Perhaps it is impossible structurally, too. If your whole structure is based on the negation of this existence, how will acknowledgement come to be? Even if it is on-trend or market-led now, it can easily recede again

– as it has historically. That is why it is imperative for us to continue with this ‘resistance work’, which is refusing easy categorisation and maintaining a level of complexity and productive anxiety. If your practice fits in as the performative thing that some institutions desire, it can also be easily substituted with another. This is not movement. I would ideally like to enable multiple directions for the work to move in, rather than a closing down. So, I’m asking for space and an openness.

AD: How can curators help you then?

MES: You can align. For me, I realise that it isn’t about exposure, it’s about a long-term building of relationships. What we’re doing right now, you connect with people that align with your thinking and you invest. Investment is very real and can be emotional. It really lasts, it’s not something that just pops up. Sometimes you want to go for the ‘big names’, but you have to actually say no to that and choose what is more nourishing. I am really happy that I have a few people who support me; you only need a few who really believe in it. Also, acknowledging limitations and accept the limitations of your practice makes you understand the urgency – otherwise the machine just takes everything. Oh, and keep the anger.

Interview by Amrita Dhallu, Curatorial Assistant: Commissions, Chisenhale Gallery, conducted on 7 December 2018, Chisenhale Gallery, London. Chisenhale Research Project Editor: Ellen Greig, Curator: Commissions.

COLOPHON

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Now let us shift has been devised by Amrita Dhallu, Curatorial Assistant: Commissions as part of Chisenhale Gallery's 2018–19 *Curatorial Trainee Programme*.

Interviewer: Amrita Dhallu
Editors: Amrita Dhallu, Ellen Greig and Polly Staple
Interviewees: Mandy El-Sayegh, Lubaina Himid and Lydia Ourahmane
Copy Editor: Daniel Griffiths
Transcriber: Rosie Ram
Design: Amrita Dhallu

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Chisenhale Gallery
64 Chisenhale Road
London E3 5QZ
United Kingdom
+44 (0)20 8981 4518
www.chisenhale.org.uk

This research project was commissioned as part of Chisenhale Research. This programme encompasses a wide range of activity and is informed by the institution's 36-year history and the gallery's current commissioning process. Identifying new forms of artistic practice is central to our research, as is understanding the ways in which artworks are shaped historically and geographically. This is directly explored through the *Commissions* and *Engagement Programmes*.

Led by director Polly Staple, the curatorial team at Chisenhale Gallery are currently establishing a new framework to address research into the gallery's exhibition and commissions history. This involves completing the historic archive and digitising further archive material, as well as commissioning researchers to investigate new approaches to this material.

This document is available as an electronic publication, downloaded from:

<https://chisenhale.org.uk/research/now-let-us-shift/>

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CHISENHALE GALLERY

64 Chisenhale Road, London, E3 5QZ

+44 (0)20 8981 4518

www.chisenhale.org.uk

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Current exhibition: Mandy El-Sayegh

12 April – 9 June 2019

Wednesday to Sunday, 12 - 6pm

Thursday 2 May, 12 - 9 pm

Friday 17 May, 12 - 9 pm

Thursday 6 June, 12 - 9 pm



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