Billy Dosanjh and the Quest to Settle

By Hammad Nasar

What do we know about migrant memories? What imaginative, material and relational worlds do immigrants build in new and often hostile lands? What stories do they tell each other? How do they share these stories across generations, and between communities of different cultural heritages? What contextual knowledge informs how people understand these stories? In what ways do they seep into the wider cultural landscape?

These questions rose like thought bubbles over the works of Billy Dosanjh in his most ambitious exhibition to date, [Traveller, Your Footprints], curated by Melanie Kidd at the New Art Exchange in Nottingham (23 Sep 2022–7 Jan 2023). The exhibition brought together three bodies of work – one of the artist's earliest films, Year Zero: Black Country (2014); one of his most recent, Indi (2022); and, the photo series, Exiles (2019–22). These works were separated by time and medium, but united by Dosanjh's commitment to art as a form of storytelling, with Year Zero playing the same role for the works that follow as the 'mother dough' or 'starter' does in the production of fresh loaves of sourdough bread – a source of potentially endless future production. For the purpose of this short text, I will address Year Zero and Dayshift (2019), the first image in the Exiles series, and consider what they reveal about Dosanjh's wider artistic project.

The hour-long Year Zero mixes television archives, shaky home movies and footage recorded by the artist to sketch out a polyphonic story of South Asian immigration to feed the foundries and industries of the Black Country in the last gasp of its industrial might in the 1960s. "All the shit jobs come from Smethwick" deadpans the voiceover near the beginning, and the film goes on to reveal the mostly single, illiterate or semi-literate working-class single men, who came to Britain to fill these roles, and their struggles to make the Black Country home. Dosanjh grew up in Smethwick, and as part of the process of making this film, invited members of his Punjabi community to join him in watching snippets from over a hundred hours of archival footage from the 1960s and 1970s. The footage became a series of visual prompts to trigger memories of the arduous business of making a life: full of labour, hardship, loneliness, and racism; but also, comradeship, resilience, humour and joy.

Year Zero probes at what it means to remember, and reminds us that remembering is a creative act. The work's collage of more than twenty stories gleaned from Dosanjh's communal screening sessions, may not always have an indexical relationship to historical fact, but they paint a complex picture that approaches a larger 'truth' than an enumeration of facts ever could. Narrations of these personal vignettes, each announced by black and white title shots in English and Punjabi (in Gurmukhi script), are used as voice over for archival footage. These diaristic reflections are interspersed with the supposed neutrality of news reporting and documentary footage–children playing in terraced streets; white neighbours agreeing and enforcing colour bars;

and Malcolm X's historic 1965 visit to Smethwick–whose language often echoes the hateful bile of Enoch Powell ("hordes", "aliens", "rivers of blood"), the local member of Parliament for neighbouring Wolverhampton. We may know these historic narratives, but familiarity does not dull the bite of the casual everyday racism, for instance, of the barber who refuses to serve his brown would-be customer ("its closed for you").

Much of the power of Year Zero is due to not just what is shown but how. Dosanjh, a graduate of the National Film School, cut his teeth on film and television documentaries before turning to the greater liberties offered by visual art. We can see, hear and feel the affective range these skills and experience make possible in the complex sound design, editing and confident varying of speed he plays with in Year Zero. A short sequence towards the end brings these gifts together and takes us effortlessly from the documentation of a nightclub performance by an elastic-limbed brown disco dancer into almost abstract reverie of sound and image, reminding us of both the beauty and the banality of our everyday performance of self. As soon as the film finishes, one is tempted to stay seated to watch its rich mixture of sound, image and feeling again to better understand what went on then, and how it makes us feel now.

The Exiles series is the artist's attempt at finding new visual forms to stay with some of the stories of Year Zero. Informed by the work of artists like Gregory Crewdson, Stan Douglas and Tracey Moffatt, the Exiles photographs are elaborately staged, with scripts, lighting rigs and carefully cast characters. Dosanjh has described this way of working as making 'single shot movies' – a phrase that captures his investment in the cinematic intent behind each image. In these images is also a search for a visual language that honours the nobility of the migration stories that nurtured Dosanjh and those of his generation who grew up in the Black Country.

Dayshift is the first and most elaborately staged of the Exiles series. It has been shot along a row of two-up, two-down terraced houses in the Black Country Living Museum; street scenes familiar to us from Year Zero. Dayshift has been shot from a height. Its scale (110 x 135 cm) offers us a voyeur's view–like that of the curtain-twitching neighbour peeping from the upstairs window in the centre of Dayshift–into each of the many stories playing out in adjacent back rooms and gardens. One can trace these to the narrated stories in Year Zero: the young South Asian dandy's furtive romance with a young white woman with her back to us; two visibly nervous, turbaned figures on the verge of beheading a (taxidermied) swan with a machete; or the man lurking at the back with a bottle of Dr John Collis Browne's cough mixture – an addictive blend of alcohol, opium, chloroform and cannabis used as a cure-all in times of war, but repurposed and widely used by immigrant communities to combat depression and loneliness.

The golden sheen with which Dayshift is lit is an obvious reference to 17th Century Dutch painting; its so-called Golden Age. Dosanjh has also nodded to the inspiration of American photographer Todd Hido's night shots, the cinematic portraits of Gregory Crewdson and the unsettling staged scenes of Tracey Moffat's Up in the Sky (1997) series of photographs. But in Dayshift's capacity to hold multiple fragmented narratives that toggle between inside and outside, light and dark, I also see the architectural treatment of space in South Asian miniature painting,

and its contemporary refashioning in the works of artists like Gulammhammed Sheikh, Bhupen Khakhar, Shahzia Sikander and Imran Qureshi. As in miniature painting, Dosanjh too privileges multiple perspectives rather than a single point one, even though his images have been shot with a single lens.

Exiles takes its title from Kent MacKenzie's 1961 documentary about a group of young Native Americans who leave their reservation to move to a decaying part of Los Angeles in the 1950s. It is worth noting that many of Dosanjh's artistic references are from artists associated with settler-colonies – Tracey Moffat and Shaun Tan are Australian; Stan Douglas and Cornelius Krieghoff, Canadian; and Gregory Crewdson and Todd Hido, American. Collectively their work engages with what it means to arrive at a new place, and to make a life there with people who may be different from you. To settle.

In postwar Britain, we have yet to develop a set of cohesive stories around the South Asian immigrant experience. Unlike immigrant communities from the Caribbean, there is no unifying story of the MS Windrush to serve as a near-mythic point of origin. A single point perspective is impossible to address the complexities of faith, caste and class of people of South Asian cultural heritage in Britain. Even the geography of 'South Asia' is contested given the historic movement of indentured South Asian labour within the British Empire in the 19th and early 20th centuries (for instance, to Africa, East Asia and the Caribbean); the 1947 partition of British India into independent nations of India and Pakistan; and, the 1971 creation of Bangladesh from what was previously East Pakistan.

By firmly planting his artistic project in the working class, post-industrial, communities of South Asian heritage in the Black Country, Dosanjh has taken on the task of creating a new form of 'settler art'. In our post-Brexit times of divisive anti-immigrant rhetoric, echoing Enoch Powell, and often most stridently voiced by UK-born politicians from South Asian heritage immigrant families, Dosanjh's artistic project seems not just timely, but an urgent cultural conversation. Without settling the past, there is no clear way forward.

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