

Billy Dosanjh

[Traveller, Your Footprints]

MAIN GALLERY

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Billy Dosanjh (b. 1980) is an artist, filmmaker and storyteller whose practice pays tribute to every displaced person. Born and raised in the Black Country area of the West Midlands, he has built a body of work that explores the lives of South Asian empire workers who arrived in this blue-collar region in the last throes of its industrial might. With a title inspired by Antonio Machado's 19th century poem, *Traveller, Your Footprints*, this new exhibition brings together three bodies of work that document and creatively interpret the incredible journeys of these marginalised individuals and the generations that followed them. In doing so, Dosanjh brings to the fore an important yet missing visual vernacular of a people and place.

Here, Dosanjh discusses his practice and the works on show with the exhibition curator, Melanie Kidd.

MK: You've described that your fundamental drive as an artist is to explore the harsh and romanticised setting of the de-industrialised Black Country. Tell us more about your fascination and commitment to this region.

BD: I grew up in West Bromwich in the 80s and 90s within a close-knit, working class, Punjabi community, absorbing the stories from my parents' generation who experienced the epic upheaval of emigrating here from India in the 1960s. Their memories of back home, the journey, and the life that followed — some first-hand and some second-hand accounts — coupled with general community gossip and my own observations, formed a complex history and mythology about a people and a place which is little documented. I don't consider myself a politically minded artist, but I'm aware the most political thing you can do is tell a story.

I'm fascinated by the history and also the landscape of the Black County — one which couldn't have contrasted more with the rural landscapes my parents' generation left behind in India. As the global birthplace of the industrial revolution, the Black Country was once the epicentre of the world, yet through the deindustrialisation of the

70s and 80s, my hometown of Smethwick has long been one of the most economically deprived parts of the UK. The canals, terraced housing, and de-commissioned factory buildings that remain, continue to speak of this history. These settings form an important aspect of my films and photographs — not so much as backdrops, but as actual characters in the work.

MK: We've encouraged visitors to the show to begin by viewing your 2014 film, *Year Zero: Black Country* as chronologically it's the oldest piece of work in the show, but importantly, as the title suggests, the piece seems to demarcate a starting point.

BD: Yes, *Year Zero* focusses mainly on the 1960s when thousands of economic migrants from the former colonies came to the railway town of Smethwick in the industrial heartlands of England. It's when so much changed in the UK with the influx of these new communities, and significantly, they arrived ready to start a new life, one full of promise and dreams of betterment. Things had changed, history was starting again.

MK: I find the film really moving. It reveals hopes, dreams, fears and the harsh realities of what it was to be a migrant and manual worker in 1960s Britain. It's an intimate piece and you tell the story with compassion, warmth, and humour. What was the motivation for creating *Year Zero*?

BD: Making *Year Zero* was my way of really trying to unpick and understand the history and current context of both my family and my community. In turn, the piece is about trying to understand the diasporic experience. I found amazing 1960s archive footage of the area which I showed to people and it was fascinating to watch their response and listen to the memories it provoked.

Year Zero is created from a mix of newsreel archive footage and donated photographs and videos, alongside newly recorded interviews and fictional footage. The process and the finished film revealed a lot to me. A series of local anecdotes, stories, myths and characters also emerged, and I knew I needed to try and tell their stories further. That's what led to the creation of *Exiles* and *Indi*.

MK: Starting then with the *Exiles* photo series, can you tell us more about the title.

BD: The title was inspired by the 1961 film by Kent MacKenzie, *The Exiles*, which chronicled a group of young Native Americans who left reservation life in the 1950s to live in Los Angeles. The film captures the confusion and complexity of adapting to cultures and environments so different to your own. This scenario, and the way in which the characters struggle with a process of self-reckoning, was so familiar to me. Like MacKenzie's protagonists, each of my characters in *Exiles* are trying to make sense of

their lives. Additionally, each find themselves exiled from where they came from in the sense that economically there is probably no way back, and if they could return, would they even fit in? At the same time, they are exiled from the place they now find themselves in, be that through a lack of acceptance by the indigenous population, or maybe through a personal struggle to connect with such a foreign land.

MK: This theme of being in-between or on the cusp of something occurs a lot in your work. When I look at the draft notes we made when trying to decide on an exhibition title, I see words like thresholds, limbo, dreamtime and portals...

BD: Yes, I think I'm drawn to journeys, transitioning and moments of change in life's story arc — epiphanies, in particular. A threshold is an interesting concept — where you're neither in nor out, when there is no return from that point, but the journey still remains incomplete. *Traveller, Your Footsteps* felt like the best title for the show. It's taken from a poem by the 19th century, Spanish master, Antonio Machado. His work is introspective and stark and I find it powerful in capturing the themes of the great move, to which I'm drawn to explore in my work.

MK: Coming back to *Exiles*, tell us more about the five settings you have chosen: a sewing factory and a factory courtyard, a canal, a pub and a

view into some terraced houses and their back gardens.

BD: If you're to tell a story about the life of a person or a community, you need to consider the various contexts and spaces they exist within — the domestic space, the work space, the personal space, the social space etc. The first image made in the series was *Dayshift* (2019) — the terraced houses and gardens. Set in the twilight hours, we see people either returning home to relax, or getting up to start their day. Two men are seen in a bedroom together, whilst through another window, a woman receives and solemnly reads a letter from home — it's not good news. Outside, moonshine is being made and what appears to a beheaded swan is being prepared for a traditional cooking pot. An illicit meeting seems to be happening, and all of this takes place under the indigenous gaze of a British neighbour.

MK: Do some of the characters we see in *Dayshift* re-appear in the other four photographs?

BD: Yes, for example, the woman with the letter in *Dayshift*, appears again in the sewing factory, and it's clear that she has carried the weight of the bad news to her place of work. The sewing factory was significant in my community. It employed many of the mothers, or they worked from a sewing machine at home, making things for the factory. They were often unscrupulous

places in terms of how the employees were paid and the safety on site. The men typically worked in the steel factory, and here I've depicted the courtyard, where the migrant workers are taking a break outside, separately from the indigenous workers inside. Their clothes are dirtier than the white foreman's and their white co-workers, as they were given the more manual and less desirable tasks — a two-tier hierarchy was the reality of factory life. They listen to their foreman. He is asking them to cast their union vote. Due to language challenges, they are left confused, overwhelmed and lost in their own world. This language barrier could also have catastrophic consequences as you'll see in the *Year Zero* archive footage, and many of these workers would go on to suffer from tuberculosis.

After work, the men would gather at the pub, pints of Mickey Mouse — half bitter, half larger — lined up on the bar ready to quench their parched throats. Due to their newly arrived status, bank accounts and loans were not available, so instead the men replicated the 'cooth' banking system from India, where everyone would donate from their weekly earnings, and at the end of the month, whoever had the greatest need would take some money out. This system enabled families to buy their first homes here in the UK.

MK: That's an incredible peer-support system, however there is a tension in the pub image.

BD: Yes, all eyes are on the money. Has greed set in? Have these men started to become indoctrinated to a more materialistic way of living in the UK? Or does the tension reflect a resentment for the fact they have to rely on such systems. To be denied a bank account is a reminder of your second-class status — a tone that was set at an early stage of life in the UK, and one that is difficult to forget.

MK: The final setting is the canal which seems to be a transition away from the urban and industrial setting, and into the rural.

BD: A homage to the Black Country landscape would be incomplete without the inclusion of the canal. The canal represents the periphery, the route in and out of these industrial spaces. It's a space that's always been tinged with danger, especially after dark. As teenagers we were drawn to canals — they represented escape — but we were forbidden to go there. I feel it is the most story-led and psychological of the five images. We see a canal boat transporting goods, but after dark. There is a woman and several men. One man holds a red scarf, or is it a scarf soaked with blood?

I've observed what happens when men lose touch with femininity. For example, too often, men who had travelled alone to the UK to work, were unable to return home for their mother's

funerals, and this had huge impact on their mental wellbeing. I've also seen that boys and men, without the influence of women, can run amok and behaviours change. However, interestingly, I also observed their relief when they returned home to their mothers, wives and sisters, and reconnected with their feminine side. This image is about what happens internally with men.

MK: Male and female relationships are explored further in the newly commissioned short film *Indi*. Here we've moved through time, to the 1990s, where Sheeru, is raising her football loving, British born son, Indi.

BD: *Indi* is very much about a mother and son's relationship, it's about their bond, how their lives contrast and about Sheeru's conflicted hopes and dreams for both herself and her son. The story of Indi was legendary in my community. He was an exceptional footballer who first played for his uncle's local team, and he was scouted by West Bromwich Albion. The problem was, he kept getting injured during the informal matches with his uncle's team, and he didn't receive the family support to give Albion the commitment and focus they needed. Albion had to give up on Indi, and after he broke his ankle during one of the local games, his dreams of playing for England were shattered. During a similar period, Indi's mother became ill and died.

MK: *Indi's* story is a compelling one, but when you watch the film, it feels less about him, and more about his mother.

BD: That's right. As the planning for the piece developed, it became clear that Sheeru's journey should take precedence. She represents a very sad but commonplace experience for women in my community in that period. I observed that our mothers were often these happy, but not happy characters, who loved their children but led a life limited by cultural expectation and lack of opportunity. Their days were constrained to a small urban footprint of travelling between the house, shopping and worship, and they struggled with a longing for a 'home' that no longer existed and a desire to maintain their family's culture and faith, whilst also wanting to see their children integrate and succeed. This generation of women could no longer rely on the nurturing embrace of the village for support, and sadly depression and even addiction could set in — something that was little discussed, leaving these women extremely isolated with little or no support.

MK: Through the works we journey from the 1960s in *Year Zero*, through the 70s/80s in *Exiles* and into the 90s with *Indi*. Is it fair to say that this timeline reveals how the complexities of displacement can ripple, echo and transform through generations?

BD: It is, and importantly, I feel the Sheeru's narrative in *Indi* creates a reflective moment to look back, and reckon with the choices you have made and the life you have lived. Is it Indi's dream that is over or is it the end of Sheeru's dream for her life? Either way, the death of a dream is a death in itself.

MK: Billy, thank you for talking about the work so openly and eloquently. I hope visitors will join us on 3rd November where we'll be showing another of your short films, *Lumbu* (2022) and talking more about your practice.

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