

Billy Dosanjh *The Exiles*

11 November 2022 — 5 February 2023



Billy Dosanjh is an artist, film-maker and storyteller who was born in Smethwick, in the Black Country region of the West Midlands. He was raised within a close-knit, working class, Punjabi community.

His ambitious new body of photographic works pay tribute to those largely male migrant workers, especially those from the British colonies of South Asia, who came to the Black Country in the 1960s, to a region in the last throes of its industrial might, to find work and to create a new life for themselves.

Billy has drawn on his lived experience and the rich and vibrant stories told by his family and community to explore what happens when cultures merge and to create a visual vernacular for a history that has inextricably shaped our region forever.



Billy Dosanji, *Day Shift*, 2019. Courtesy the artist.

Trained as a film-maker at the National School of Film and Television, Billy has since made highly impactful award-winning films such as *A Miracle in West Brom* (2014) and *The Sikhs of Smethwick* (2016). To create *The Exiles*, he has applied filmic principles such as set building, casting, costumes, props, make up and extensive lighting to create complex, composite images, each drawing on personal histories and memories; stories of struggle and survival set against a context of upheaval, violence and hope. *Day Shift* (2019), for example, presents a constellation of stories set in rows of terraced houses and their small yards and gardens. Set in the twilight hours, we see people returning home to relax, or getting up to start their day. Through one window, a woman solemnly reads a letter from home. Outside, moonshine is being made and what appears to be a swan is being prepared for cooking. *Day Shift* is created from over 800 source files. These works are best described as single shot movies where these mysterious quiet narratives are operatic in scale.

The other scenes represented include a sewing factory, a foundry courtyard, a canal and a pub, reflecting the work, domestic and social life of the community. In the foundry courtyard, the migrant workers take a break, away from the indigenous workers inside. They listen to their foreman who is asking them to cast their union vote. Due to language challenges, they are lost and confused. Some of these workers would go on to suffer from tuberculosis.

The woman reading the letter in *Day Shift* returns again in the sewing factory. Billy remembers that many of the women in his community worked there and these factories were unscrupulous places in terms of fair payment and health and safety.

After work, the men would gather at the pub and drink pints of Mickey Mouse – half bitter and half lager. 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 wages, and at the end of the month, whoever had the greatest need would benefit. This system enabled families to buy their first homes in the UK.



Billy Dosanjh, *Seamstress*, 2022. Courtesy the artist.

The final setting is the canal at night where an ominous incident seems to be taking place. One man holds a red scarf, or is it a scarf soaked with blood?

Billy works with both specialist teams as well as volunteers from the local community including more recent migrants to the region. Billy says;

Involving my home community in these kinds of work is the most rewarding feeling; to take them on voyages into the earliest memories of British life has been a genuine joy. By working with a cast of newly arrived migrants today, we are able to explore the circularity of the experience of non-natives merging with local life, of history on loop.

Billy has sourced a wide range of old photographs to ensure that these images clearly evoke a sense of the Black Country in the 1960s but has also absorbed a wide range of art historical references. The history of painting is particularly influential. 16th century Italian painters such as Caravaggio (1517-1610) and Raphael (1483-1520) created highly structured compositions and used dramatic light effects to highlight the protagonists, enhanced further through their dramatic

facial expressions and gestures. From 19th century French artists like Gustave Courbet (1819-1877) and Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), he has drawn on their fascination with the everyday and their ability to position the viewer within the action. The American photographer Gregory Crewdson (born 1962) has been a source of great inspiration with his elaborately staged scenarios using cinematographic lighting as has the practice of indigenous Australian artist Tracey Moffatt (born 1960). The title of the work comes from another influential source; a 1961 documentary by Kent MacKenzie which observes a day in the life of a group of native Americans who leave reservation life in the 1950s to move to a decaying district of Los Angeles. The film captures the confusion and complexity of adapting to cultures and environments so different to your own.

Though this work is rooted in Billy's own strong connections to the Black Country and its communities, these stories continue to resonate globally as war, social conditions and climate crisis continue to force migration around the world and people continue to be uprooted from their familiar lives and cultures to search for a better and safer life.



Billy Dosanjh, *The Bridge*, 2022. Courtesy the artist.

Biography

Billy makes art that explores diaspora stories. The work he makes comes from a place of connection, with the stories and storytellers of cultures from elsewhere. It began in Smethwick, his hometown, and its surrounding areas. This desire took him to the National Film and Television School and onto a career as an artist and filmmaker, with multiple broadcast credits and a vault of awards and nominations.

Billy is currently in pre-production on his drama feature debut, *You Get Me?* with BBC Films and BFI, based loosely on his documentary *Beauty Queens*, made in 2005. He has recently had his first major solo exhibition, *Traveller, Your Footprints* at the New Art Exchange in Nottingham (closes on 7 January 2023), amongst a compendium of projects and productions.

We'd love to hear your thoughts about the exhibition, scan the QR code to complete a short survey



EVENTS

In Conversation

Saturday 28 January, 2pm

Join Billy Dosanjh with Head of Exhibitions, Deborah Robinson for an informal tour of the exhibition followed by a screening of Billy's short film *Lumbu*, the story of a young boy which was largely shot in Caldmore.

Please book your free place at the Reception Desk or book via Eventbrite (visit our website for details):

thenewartgallerywalsall.org.uk

Resources

A filmed interview with the artist can be found in our Resource Area on the Mezzanine Level.



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