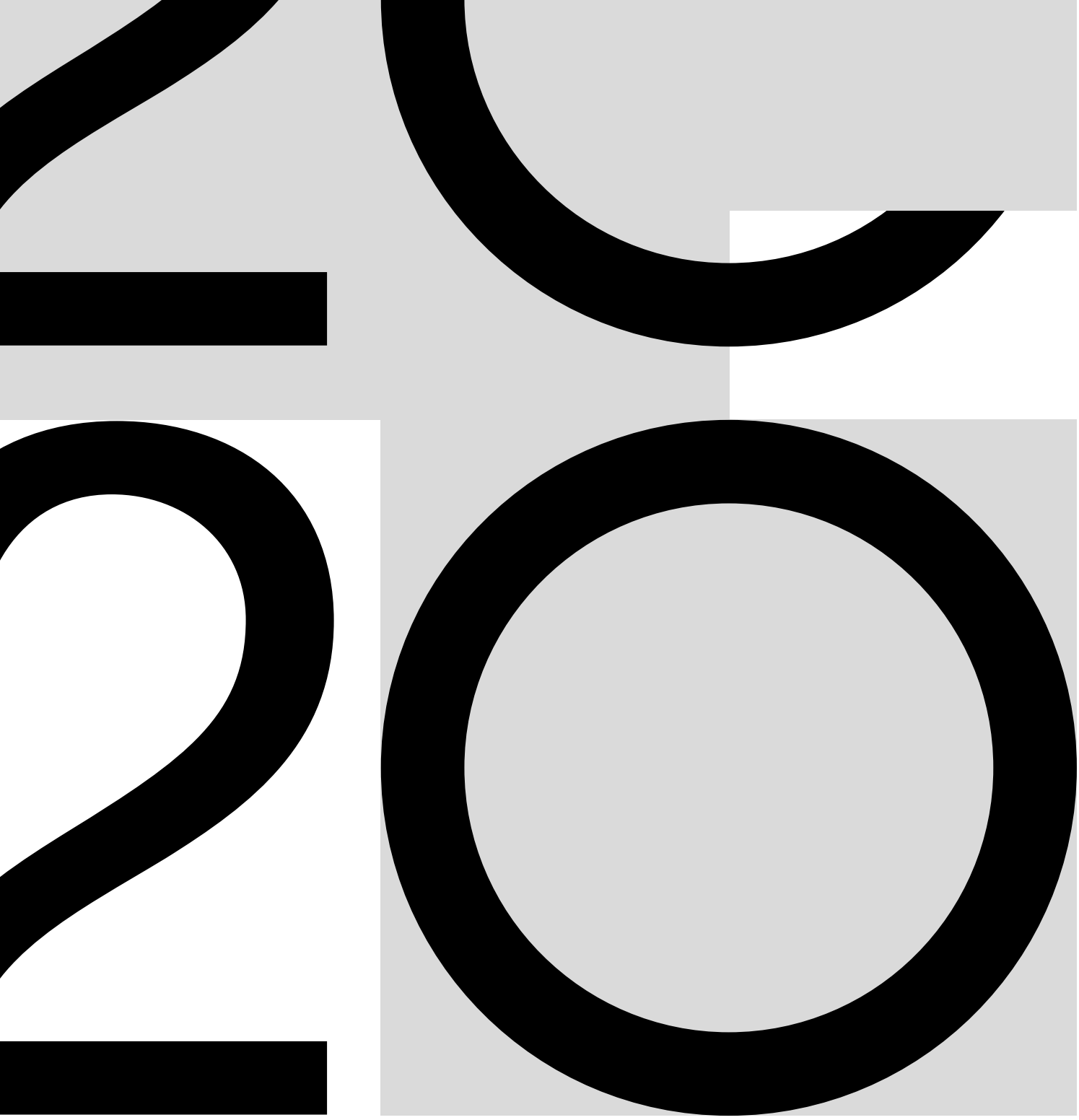

Ekow Eshun
in Conversation
with Billy Dosanjh

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20/20 is an ambitious three-year programme that engaged 20 emerging or mid-career ethnically diverse artists of colour and 20 public art collections across the UK, resulting in 20 new permanent acquisitions.

Generously supported by Arts Council England, Freelands Foundation and UAL, 20/20 combined artist residencies and commissioning at scale, with the aim of catalysing artists' careers and fostering meaningful change in collections - not only through the artworks that will ultimately enter the collections but also through a peer network of artists and curators, and the critical interrogation of collections practices.

Ekow Eshun: Billy, let's get into your thinking. You talk about being drawn to the idea of the Black Country as a central narrative in the Earth's history. What do you mean by that?

Billy Dosanjh: Yeah. UNESCO talks about Black Country as a site that's been geologically of importance for over half-a-billion years.It's a place where coal basically sits on the surface. So, the innovators in the 1700s, like Richard Arkwright, who were creating new technologies, were doing so because this place was so abundant in coal. The experimentation and innovation that occurred in the Black Country left their mark on the planet because that technology became part of the empire's wealth-generating processes. I think the Black Country is fascinating for that reason. Obviously, in Tolkien's 'Lord of the Rings', Mordor is inspired by the Black Country. Tolkien used to live in Edgbaston, so he could see the Black Country heaving with all of this pollution.

EE: I did not know that.

BD: In the Black Country, they're very proud of this history. I have been looking at what they have in their collection at Wolverhampton Art Gallery. I was like, 'I'm really interested in your landscape paintings and what is documented in them and what isn't documented in them'. But the paintings are about the slag heaps and the burning environment, really. The painters who expressed this environment did it in a way where they were romanticising the landscape of the Industrial Revolution, without ever telling the stories of the people in it.

The people who worked in those spaces, their stories have not been documented or told. That's how this emerged, really. A lot of my practice has been about outsider experiences and how to convey them. I've done it in film, in photography. In this instance, I was really interested in trying to find a way to generate these missing stories.

My parents and the other empire workers, they turned up when the Industrial Revolution there had finished. They turned up on the last page of the book. I was interested in the consequences of coming to a place when the Industrial Revolution was dead or dying.

The aspect that I found challenging was that there was nothing in their collection showing empire workers being part of the end of the Industrial Revolution. That was something I wanted to try and course-correct.

EE: Let's unpack the work you've been making on this residency. Let's talk about the film 'Ends of the World'. You describe it as exploring the complexities of the Anthropocene through the lens of colonialism and race.

BD: Part of the research I've been doing is about hierarchies in the workplace in the 1950s and 1960s. I was really interested in the stories that I've heard and gathered about white foremen in very clean outfits. Then it's the immigrants – and especially the ones who don't speak English – who were right in the muckiest, dirtiest, most back-breaking work. That hierarchy that's going on there – between the English and then the Irish and the Caribbeans and the South Asians – is an echo of the racial order that empire has put forth.

I just found that really compelling, and I'm trying to find a way to express that in a film work. I'm still editing it. It's about 30 minutes long at the moment and it still needs a lot of love and a lot of work. But those industrial struggles in the 1950s and 1960s and 1970s are something I want to convey.

I'm using that period almost as a jump point to go backwards, and to ask, how did they get here? What happened from the Industrial Revolution's beginning, to these people landing here in their droves to assume roles at the bottom of this chain? I've been collecting anecdotes and reflections from people's testimonies from that period, talking about the labour issues and labour rights.

Through research, I was led to Kathryn Yusoff's book A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None (2018); a very dense, very brainy book, but it got me thinking, in terms of the Black body and the 'triangular trade' and the Middle Passage. I wanted to find a way to leap from that research into thinking about the Black Country.

EE: That's the thing. It seems to me that the project overall, it's personal, it's political but it's also planetary. It goes back to the 1960s, but also thinks about deep time and thinks geologically – there's an ambition to that. How do you hold all those elements together?

BD: There's been so much information coming my way that I've had to think about how to form it. When Harold Macmillan in 1957 told his civil service to do a profit-and-loss account for their colonial possessions so they could decide which countries to ditch, that for me is fascinating. I think it was never about the colonised; it was about the burden of the coloniser, the way they were discarding their, if you like, territorial possessions at that time. That's the period when these people arrived in Britain.

I'm thinking about the balance sheet and the cash flow of a system like the British Empire, and the way that they create line items for everything, and that systematising of the planet, bodies, cattle, coal. That was what Yusoff was really talking about. It's just like it was all the same. It was all economic. It was all about economic assets and how you deploy them.

What I'm trying to do with the film is think about how that psychology is playing out in the experiences of these people who arrived in Britain at that time.

My dad was a witness and a passenger in that journey. There's a deep respect that they all have for each other, these old factory workers or people who've done that time – and my dad is one of them. He would've been working in a factory in 1967 at the age of 14 because he lied about his age to get a job.

What I find compelling about him and his ilk is the suddenness of their growth, the fact they became adult really young, a lot of them. They're buying their first houses when they're 17 or 18 and they're having a very different experience to someone like me, who's been to LSE and reads a lot and lives in a flat in Hoxton and all that. They led these out-of-context lives because I don't think they were quite aware of the consequences of their decision. They all jumped and came without having really thought it through or planned it well.

My parents were always very wary of white people and didn't trust white people. My dad would say, 'When we arrived it was like this. That would be part of the schooling that we'd get at home'. I guess I'm trying to unpack that a little bit. What was that when they came? Where was that psychology? What was the cultural context then? Where did that come from?

EE: Why do you think, for you, you've taken on this role as a chronicler of the Black Country in its complexity?

BD: It's my dad but it's also the characters I grew up with, the proper, proper characters. Paul Dean was one of the characters in my neighbourhood, one of my dad's best mates. Bless him, he's dead. He was Paul Dean, but his surname was T-h-e-e-n because he had a Bengali father, English mother. There were seven brothers. He was a wrestler in the community. He also used to rob jukeboxes and he used to carry a sword. He was a hard man.

A lot of the lads that I grew up with, or my dad's mates, they had a bit of a death wish. They were quite hard on themselves because they grew up in quite a harsh world. I think the way that people in those periods were forming relationships with the environment, with each other, in their family homes, across generations – it is endlessly compelling.

EE: Let's talk about the shift in your practice, from film to photography to making these large-scale canvases. Why that shift in form?

BD: In this instance, it's less about the form. It's more about, how do I get to the things that I'm drawn to, right? Like, in the photography, I'm really drawn to the birth point of modern Britain, in the early 1960s when the colour palette changes in Europe forever. How do I catalyse that? How do I crack that atom? What can I do?

I'm trying to employ new technology so I can generate more images in this world that I adore and I love. I've been training an AI model. I've got a bunch of out-of-copyright paintings, so I can use them ethically, and I've got my own collected images of empire workers in the 1950s and 1960s, and I've been training a model to work with them so that I can explore my romantic yearnings for the spaces in between in these histories.

All of a sudden now, I can take those imagined scenes or recollections of local people and turn them into images quite quickly. It's helping me generate these beautiful, mournful images that I know have been true, but are missing in visual culture: like empire workers from India and the Caribbean turning coal into steel, with industrial fumes and an eternal fire from the factories in the distance.

I love the American tradition of gritty films about newcomers, like 'Mean Streets' and the early scenes of 'Deer Hunter' in Pittsburgh and those kinds of immigrant cultures transposed in these industrial environments. I think, wow! And part of my mission as an artist is I want to do that with the Midlands. I want to bring these spaces into rich technicolour.

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