



Bold Strength (2019),
SHARON WALTERS

NEW WAYS OF SEEING

“Art is not a mirror held up to reality but a hammer with which to shape it.” – Bertolt Brecht

WORDS **BIANCA BONOMI**

The global pandemic has led us on an exhaustive dance. We have found ourselves toing and froing, pulled apart by opposing and contradictory forces. The art world has largely been a victim of this undulation; finding itself stifled by lockdown policies and drained of funding channelled to frontline causes deemed more deserving. And yet, whilst we do not need art to survive in a physical sense, we need it now, more than ever, to help us to better understand the changing world we find ourselves in.

The enforced inertia brought on by museum and gallery closures has been met by new, increasingly digital, ways of reaching audiences and a focus on adapting to changed circumstances. For some artists, the extraordinary stillness and time afforded by global lockdown has resulted in prolific production; homes transformed into studio spaces, and a reimagining of traditional concepts of exhibiting work. For others, it has encouraged a more philosophical re-examining of their practice and a greater consideration of what their art is, or should be, or of what it might be capable of.

The pandemic has raised questions around education, social disparity, and sustainability, and has dismantled and disrupted key tenets of our lives that once seemed immutable. At the same time, movements like Black Lives Matter have galvanised a global conversation around systemic racism and forced us to confront uncomfortable, and very real, truths. There has been reluctance and disenchantment but there has also been immediacy – a frank, gloves-off take on social ills and a determined approach to righting them. If this period has taught us anything, it is that contemplation must be a precursor to change.

Art has a seismic role to play. As passivity moves towards action, many artists are using this opportunity to create art that is angry, dissenting, or a vessel for social critique, and producing works that highlight, and seek to overcome, failings in the system. The shield once provided by the concept of unconscious bias has been removed and artists are increasingly making their voices heard. For American artist Adrian Brandon, whose *Stolen* series of paintings hauntingly explore Black lives cut short by police brutality, art has “a tremendous role within activism because it engages people experientially through a visual language. It transcends language barriers, politics and party lines, and gives us a more universal reach. Art demands that we be vulnerable and engage at a human level, which is so vital as we work towards a just and loving world. The challenges of our times can’t be solved by politicians and policy makers alone. We need to engage both hearts and minds if we want real and lasting change.”

Engaging with audiences against a backdrop of institutional closures has encouraged artists to look at more inventive ways to exhibit work. For Venezuelan activist Daniel Arzola, a long-time advocate of showcasing work in public areas, the changing museum and gallery landscape is further proof that traditional arts spaces need a reboot.

“Museums and galleries continue to be spaces of great hierarchy that often respond to the art market and end up being exclusive and elitist,” he says. “In some cases, they exhibit works that can only exist within those spaces, but true art does not need a museum to be recognised as art. A piece of art has the power to transform the space it occupies. A mural can transform a building, a poster can change a bus stop. Art can resignify spaces.” It’s a sentiment shared by Pakistani-American satirical artist Safwat Saleem. “The traditional gallery system has shown itself to be rather inadequate and outdated. Lack of privilege and access limits the reach of so many incredible artists that deserve to be seen,” says Saleem. “These conversations are hopefully normalising the idea that artists can work outside of the traditional gallery system and go past the gatekeepers to take their work straight to the masses.” It is echoed by California-based artist Favianna Rodriguez. “The current systems are in need of major reinvention. In some instances, we need to let the old institutions die so that new ones can be born,” says Rodriguez. “The reality is that the entire arts infrastructure has been set up to advance the voices of white men and white male artists continue to dominate museum collections and gallery spaces. I don’t think the traditional gallery system is built to hold this deep global transformation that we’re going through, in which more and more people are demanding to see the art of the global majority uplifted – that is, art by BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour] artists. The traditional gallery system, in most cases, is not adapting fast enough and that’s largely because they have not spent time establishing those relationships nor do they really understand the context of our work.” For Adelaide-born artist Peter Drew, whose *Aussie* poster series is exhibited on city streets throughout Australia, it is “essential for artists to explore new ways of exhibiting their work outside of the traditional gallery system.” “But it’s about more than creating an alternative space for art,” he says. “The context in which art appears is equal in importance to the content of the work. I put up my posters illegally on the street which creates a tension that you simply can’t achieve in a gallery because everything that appears in a gallery is sanctioned. There’s always that limitation. The street has its own limitations, like bad weather and the police, but mostly it’s a joy. Every day I meet people who’d never think of visiting an art gallery and they see my posters. We talk about the history of this land and the conversation moves forward, little by little.”

We are standing at an inflection point with a chance to see the post-pandemic ‘new normal’ not as an illustrative term to describe where we are, but rather as a means of proactively shaping a new future; not just holding up a mirror to society but wielding a hammer to shape it; seeking comfort, not in the unchallenging ignorance of the past, but in the opportunity to do better.

Here, in their own words, seven artists share their vision.

SHARON WALTERS

Sharon Walters is a London-based artist who creates hand-assembled collages celebrating Black women. *Seeing Ourselves*, Walter’s ongoing series, is an exploration of under-representation and an incitement to foster, nurture and take ownership over our own spaces.

“In *Piecing It Together: Connecting Sharon Walters to Thomas, Ringgold, and Walker*, Clara Enders makes an astute observation about the different reactions that myself and Kara Walker expect from our audiences. She rightly notes that, whereas Walker chooses to confront her audience with their own discomfort, I offer an encouraging space within which my audience can reflect on their own relationship with a history that is violent and exclusionary to Black women. Through my carefully constructed hand-assembled images, curated programmes, and collaborations, I simultaneously reference under-representation whilst using art as a form of self-care. The process of creating acts as an extension of my optimistic outlook on life. At its heart, *Seeing Ourselves*, is an insight into my own experiences as a woman from the African diaspora, and I make the conscious decision to reframe them in a celebratory and uplifting light.

When Blackness is so often equated as ‘other’, for me, it is essential to offer an alternative narrative of empowerment. This approach is significant because by simply celebrating my own Blackness, I am challenging every notion of Blackness as ‘other’. My work redresses the balance, and confronts under-representation when we are excluded from so many different areas. I address our struggles and our joy, by providing reassurance that you deserve the positive representation that you see in my work. I offer comfort in the places that many Black women have experienced hurt. Each piece is a reaffirmation of the right to ‘take up space’ even when you don’t see yourself in certain settings. It is important that I celebrate Black women, particularly when we are not always celebrated in the mainstream. Through my work, I strive to share multiple versions of Blackness, offering the reassurance that you are ‘allowed’ to be multifaceted. I oppose stereotypes that there is a singular Black experience, by sharing celebratory materials that provide representation in the spaces we need it most.

‘Taking up space’ is so important as a Black woman, when our voices have been systematically and institutionally silenced. Every collage, papercut, and collaborative engagement is a reaffirmation of my right (and the right of others) to ‘take up space’. Throughout my work, I assert myself into places where we, as Black women, are often denied representation. For me, the arts and heritage sector, as well as mainstream western media as a whole, have been uncomfortable and even hostile spaces at times. The idea of ‘taking up space’ is twofold in my work. As a Black artist and

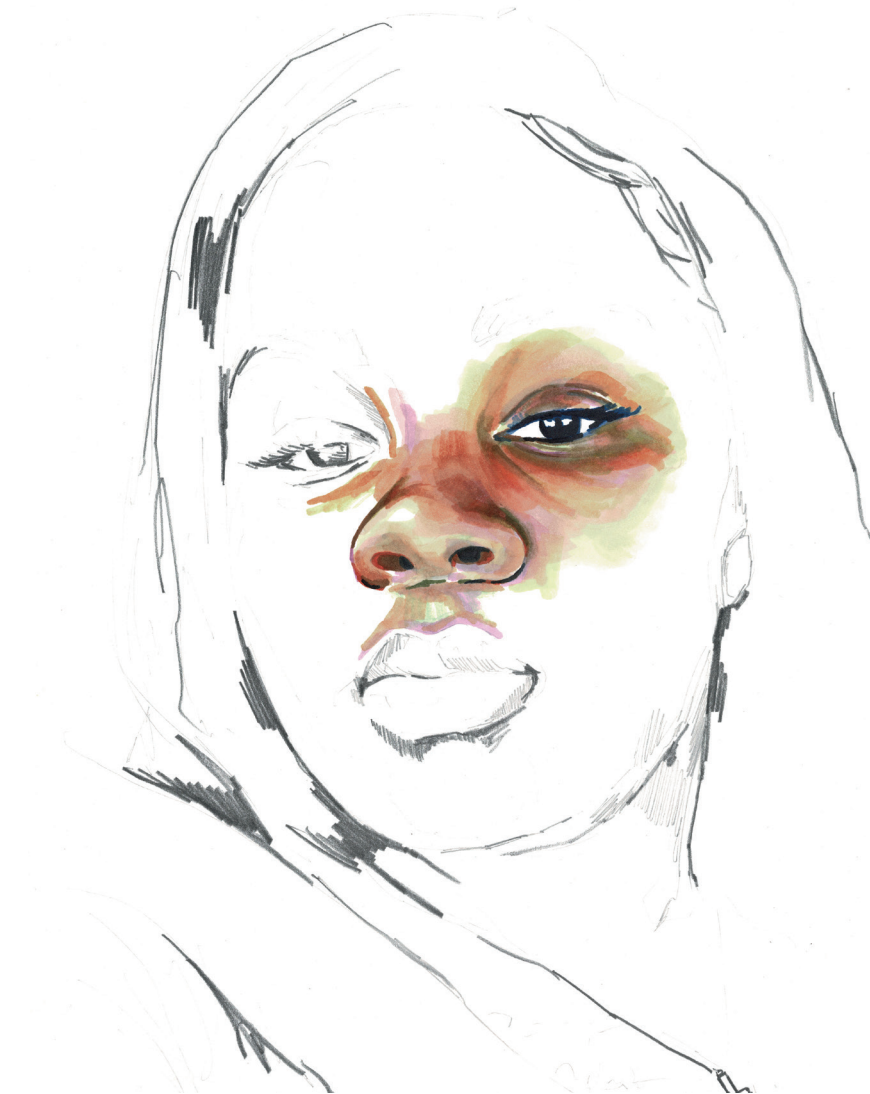
project curator, I have overcome many barriers that have inhibited my career for years. Additionally, my work empowers Black women, and gives them the confidence to feel beautiful, powerful, seen and heard, in the face of experiences that have made them feel otherwise. In a world where the artist was traditionally white and male, I know the importance of socially-engaged works of Black women, created by a Black woman. So as well as encouraging us to ‘take up space’, my work also nurtures the creation of our own spaces, and readdresses the balance in many areas of under-representation.

I firmly believe that art should engage with social and political issues by amplifying the voices of the silenced. Coming from a background in Social Sciences, my thoughts and learning have always been rooted in identity, although any ideas I had to create non-political art were taken away from me whilst studying for my Fine Art degree. A tutor was quick to tell me that in taking some self-portraits as a Black woman artist, I would instantly enter into a political and social debate. I remember the disappointment in how controversial the use of my portraits in my work seemingly was. Now, my work is a portal, allowing me to use my voice to instigate change in these arenas. I look at the ways in which we so often are desensitised to the whitewashing of historical stories and images in contemporary society, for example in women’s magazines, whose stories are collected and told in history. Who documents those stories and deems them as worthy?

At the start, my intention was to create images that show the nuances of Blackness. I wanted to represent Black women, where images of white women occupy the space. This desire has since been increasingly active. I’m currently working with the National Maritime Museum, looking at African heritage. We’re reworking and rewriting, focusing on social commentary, and on social change.

Accessibility in art is important to me, so exploring new ways of exhibiting outside of the traditional gallery system is imperative. I currently share much of my work on Instagram through my @london_artist1 account. It’s my primary way of sharing my work and the concept behind *Seeing Ourselves*. The platform has connected me with many individuals and organisations, including Hospital Rooms, Tate, and National Maritime Museum in the UK, as well as the prestigious American University, Cornell. Working with such a range of organisations allows my work to truly resonate with as many audiences as possible, in a meaningful and impactful way. Particularly during the global pandemic, my work has opened up to wider audiences. The ability to share my pieces without gallery representation has supported me throughout this time.”





ADRIAN BRANDON

In his *Stolen* series, artist Adrian Brandon features Black individuals whose lives have been cut short by police brutality and uses time as a medium to define how long each portrait is coloured, with one year of life equating to one minute of colour. “This series is dedicated to the many Black people that were robbed of their lives at the hands of the police,” Brandon explains. “For example, Tamir Rice was 12 when he was murdered, so I coloured his portrait for 12 minutes. As a Black man, I know that my future can be stolen from me if I’m driving with a broken tail light, or playing my music too loud, or reaching for my phone at the wrong time. So for each of these portraits I played with the harsh relationship between time and death. I want the viewer to see how much empty space is left in these lives, stories that will never be told, space that can never be filled. This emptiness represents holes in their families and our community, who will be forever stuck with the question, ‘who were they becoming?’”

This plays out across portraits including that of Aiyana Stanley-Jones, just seven-years-old, and George Floyd, aged 46, whose death at the hands of police acted as a catalyst for the Black Lives Matter movement. The absence of colour, reflecting the loss of life and stolen years taken from the individuals, is startling so that what is missing from the canvas becomes as important, if not more so, than what is present.

The idea for the series came about in 2018 when Brandon was undertaking a commission for a 92-year-old Black man who subsequently died of natural causes. “As I worked on the piece, my girlfriend and I discussed the haunting beauty of the unfinished work and of all the questions the empty space stirred,” he recalls. “What was his life like? Who loved him, and who did he love? Around this same time, Jemel Roberson, a 26-year-old Black man and security guard at a bar in Illinois was fatally shot by police after he had subdued and pinned a man to the ground who had just shot four

people at his bar. In the aftershock of this tragedy, and the collision of these two experiences, *Stolen* was born.”

“My intention with the series is to keep the human story out front – not just the handful of stories that make it to the media, but also the stories of Darius Tarver, Janisha Fonville, Casey Goodson Jr., Marvin Scott, Jonathan Price, Shereese Francis and so many others that few people hear about,” says Brandon. “It’s easy to become overwhelmed and demoralised by all of the information, emotion, and political battling going on, and with that comes the risk that we’ll lose stamina and focus. The human stories of loss and grief serve as our North Star. My hope is that *Stolen* elevates these individual stories through a visual language that breaks down all this pain and inspires new understanding in the midst of so much division.” The resulting body of work, in ink and graphite on paper, is both poignant and moving. “Viewers have told me they have a visceral response to *Stolen*,” Brandon says. “The simplicity and starkness of the visual image startles them and stirs deep

emotion and questioning. For viewers of my videos, which document the colouring of a portrait from start to finish, the ending of the piece is experienced as abrupt and devastating – an experience I also feel when creating the portraits and one that echoes the abrupt endings to these lives. Viewers are haunted and touched by the empty space in the portraits, which symbolise the emptiness left in the lives of family, friends, and the community... the empty chair at the dinner table, the father that will never come home, the graduation stage that will never be crossed, the wedding that will never be planned, the laughter, the kisses, the planned future that will never be. *Stolen* invites viewers to imagine and experience the loss and emptiness caused by these stolen lives.”

Adrian Brandon, adrianbrandon.com. Instagram: @ayy.bee

this page Breonna Taylor, 26 Years Old, 26 Minutes Of Colour. Graphite & Ink On Paper (2020), **ADRIAN BRANDON**
that page Aiyana Stanley-Jones, 7 Years Old, 7 Minutes Of Colour. Graphite & Ink On Paper (2019), **ADRIAN BRANDON**

DANIEL ARZOLA

Aged just 15, Daniel Arzola was tied to a pole, attacked with cigarettes, and threatened with being burned alive by his homophobic neighbours in Maracay, Venezuela. As a young man with a keen interest in art, he was also forced to watch his drawings be destroyed. The trauma of the event saw Arzola retreat from his passion for many years.

Delving deep into the artist’s personal experiences, which include being the target of hate crimes on multiple occasions, Arzola’s contemporary work explores notions of gender and LGBTIQ+ rights. *No soy tu chiste* (‘I’m not a joke’), a series of posters featuring colourful illustrations alongside powerful messages that address complex issues around civil liberties and identity, works to combat stereotypical depictions of the LGBTIQ+ community. Slogans such as “If you say you respect me but I can’t have the same rights as you then you don’t respect me” reaffirm an individual’s right to, above all, dignity, and act as a form of resistance to oppressive societal norms.

Having had much of his physical artwork targeted by bigots, Arzola turned to the digital landscape to give his work a permanence and safety not afforded by paper. “Growing up in Venezuela my work was destroyed many times,” he recalls. “I came to understand that art can be fragile. Now that my work is digital, however, it has become more accessible than ever before because you can destroy the medium, but the artwork can be reproduced again, here or anywhere else in the world. In that way, the message lives on and the work becomes indestructible. That is ‘Artivism’ for me.”

That notion of Artivism is key to Arzola’s work and one which has seen him garner social media praise from the likes of Madonna, Cyndi Lauper, and Katy Perry. “The basic idea of the word ‘Artivism’ has been shared since the end of the 20th century, referring to those artistic works that engage explicitly in a social context,” explains Arzola. “For me, art is always social because it portrays the behaviour of human beings as a response to, and evidence of, the different situations articulated by society. Art allows us to talk about who we are and where we have come from. It presents us with ideas that transcend and that enable us to share statements as a community. It needs to be accessible and it needs to be seen. A museum filled with works but never visited is just a tomb.”

Arzola acknowledges that accessibility in art remains an issue and continues to champion exhibiting outside of traditional gallery systems. “I grew up in a place without museums, cinemas, or art galleries,” he says. “But the internet changed those dynamics. I think I first got online when I was 13, and today it has become my main workspace due to how accessible knowledge and information are. Social media and the internet allow us to democratise art and bring it to everyone, connecting one or more worlds. One day Madonna may tweet the work of a young queer person who grew up in a poor neighbourhood of Venezuela. Then everything changes, because the dynamics that separated us disappear for a moment, and you, who had felt invisible all your life, suddenly feel that the world has noticed you, and this is the first step to growth.”

Since 2017, Arzola has also had a permanent exhibition, a 14-metre mural, on the Buenos Aires subway. “The station is named after Carlos Jáuregui, an activist for the civil rights of LGBTIQ+ people in Argentina. I think it is important to be able to feel represented in culture, in public spaces, to see that there are people like you facing similar situations. Art plays a fundamental role in the construction of our identity, especially in an age where the personal has become political,” says Arzola. “Art has the ability to spread the testimony of a person or a group of people and make it accessible to others. Art is knowledge. If we pay attention we will understand art as a testimony of the history of humanity. From Molière’s theatre to the art generated during the industrial revolution; from Federico García Lorca portraying the massacre of the Spanish civil war in his poetry; to the photography of Lewis Hine and his portraits of child labour; the Mexican muralism; the dancing artworks of Keith Haring during the AIDS pandemic, or a novel of Reinaldo Arenas showing the inferno created by Fidel Castro in Cuba. Art is social when it tells the realities we face together. It has the power to document the social struggles of our time. Art is political because it carries with it a message that survives whoever created it. History is usually written by those who won the war, for those who obtained power and didn’t want to share it, but art can be made by anyone, anywhere.”

Daniel Arzola, danielarzola.com

that page, top I’m Not a Joke N°29 (2013), DANIEL ARZOLA. bottom I’m Not a Joke N°49 (2018), DANIEL ARZOLA



left My Own Witness: Rupture And Repair. Sufiyah.13, Archival Pigment Print, Gold Rice Paper, Gold Embroidery Thread (2020), DONNA BASSIN
right My Own Witness: Rupture And Repair. Shontel.11, Archival Pigment Print, Gold Rice Paper, Gold Embroidery Thread (2020), DONNA BASSIN



DONNA BASSIN

An award-winning fine art photographer, installation artist, author, professor, and filmmaker, Donna Bassin is an artist heavily influenced by her work as a clinical psychologist and her experiences working with war veterans and at Ground Zero. She uses her art to explore the creative edge of collective loss, grief, mourning, and transformation. She is known for her documentaries, *Leave No Soldier* and *The Mourning After*, and her photo series *The Afterlife of Dolls* – a solo exhibition at Montclair Art Museum that was featured on PBS’ State of the Arts and received both a Golden Bell and Gradiwa Award. Her photographic series, *My Own Witness: Rupture and Repair*, explores the human desire for reconciliation in the wake of social fractures.

“Following the 2016 presidential election, I initiated portrait collaborations between those who – through race, sexuality, gender identity, age, ethnicity, and/or disability – felt they had been deemed invisible and un-entitled to their place in this American moment,” she says of the *My Own Witness* series. “Storytelling through pose, gesture, gaze, and props, they turned themselves ‘inside out’ to visually assert their identity and invite a visceral face-to-face encounter with their humanity. The shared black velvet background and chiaroscuro lighting create an aesthetic unity, joining the individual to the collective.”

With the arrival of the pandemic, however, Bassin’s work, like so many others, was interrupted. “I had to shut down the portrait studio,” she recalls. “I couldn’t bring people in to shoot them. Then one day, I was reading the news – there was economic disparity, an increasing racial divide, and a discrepancy between who was getting sick and who was receiving care. It was heart-breaking,” Bassin says. Faced with a tide of rising inequality, she felt the need to respond. “I think art is about what you do when there’s excess. I also write as a psychoanalyst, or I did write, but I felt like the writing just couldn’t hold the intensity of the feelings I felt – the helplessness,” she continues. “I’m in a professional group with my psychoanalytic community, people very much engaged in social responsibility. They are incredible scholars and thinkers, and they had written that feeling, I didn’t think that I had anything to add in that way. And you know the old adage, a picture is worth a thousand words. So one day I went down to my studio, I had one of the *My Own Witness* photographs out, I looked at it and just ripped it out of despair. Then I looked at it again as I left the studio and I thought, this is the embodiment of the inner rips and ruptures in our culture.”

Channelling the injuries brought on by the pandemic, Bassin decided to use the portraits to bring physical expression to the present unrest. “I ripped the portraits to create ‘wounds’ that reflect our individual and collective traumas. Then, inspired by the Japanese practice of Kintsugi – which mends broken pottery by using gold lacquer to repair damage while highlighting the scars – I restored the torn portraits using golden rice paper and thread,” Bassin recalls. The sewing added a visceral quality; raw, haphazard, and almost undone. “The resulting scars remind us that we must not forget the incidents that create our wounds, but rather use them as inspiration to move forward and mend our fractured relationships with ourselves and each other.”

Donna Bassin, donnabassin.com



PETER DREW

Born in Adelaide, Peter Drew's artworks have been exhibited at major arts institutions around Australia, though his most prominent work is installed on city streets. He is best known for his *Aussie* poster series, featuring archival photographs of individuals bound up in the 'White Australia Policy'; a piece of now-defunct legislation aimed at restricting non-white and particularly Asian entry into Australia.

"I like to exhibit my art on the street because public space is a great equaliser, and an ancient forum," Drew says. "When you address the public through the street you're entering into a tradition that emphasises our fundamental freedom of expression, over the value of property. I enjoy examining our collective identities and my aim is always to emphasise the connections that bind us, rather than the fractures that divide us."

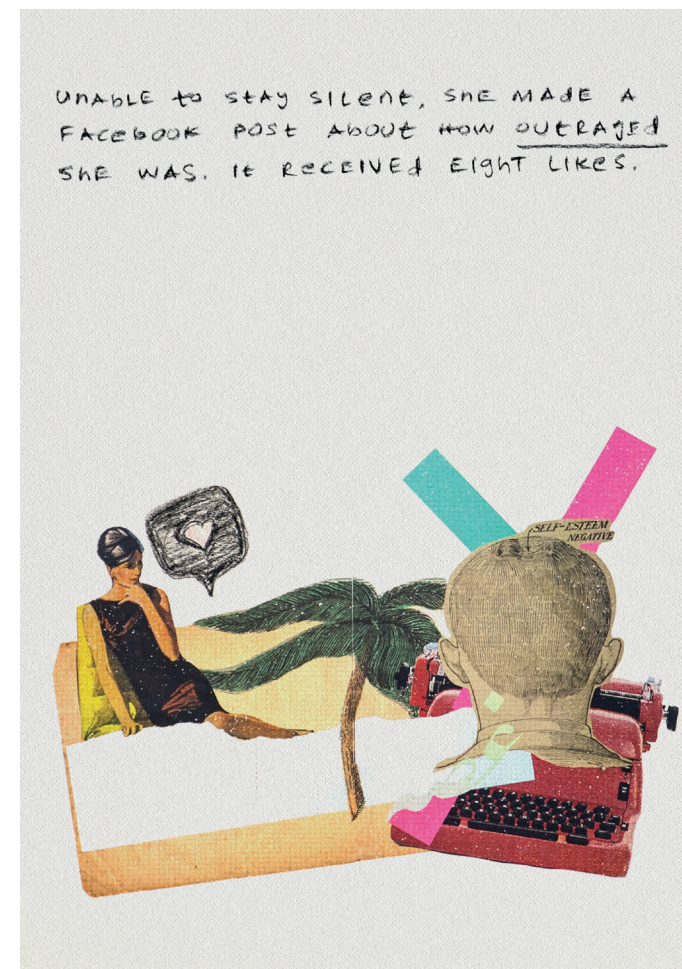
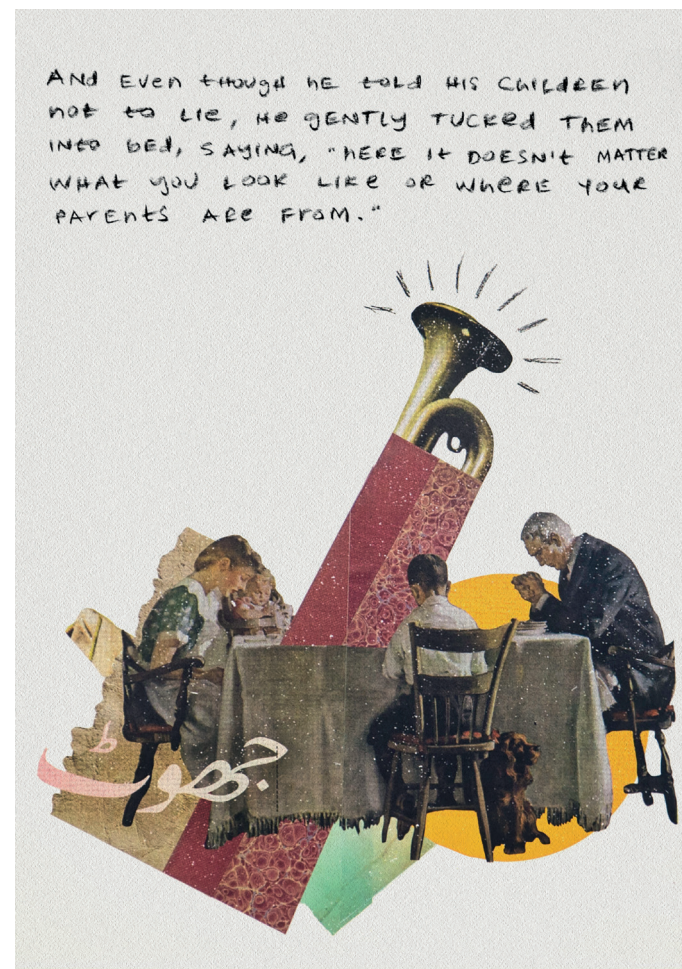
This year, Drew wanted to focus the *Aussie* project on women and children and found that the best way to locate them in the archive was to search for the phrase 'Australian Born'. "Each poster features a person who was born in Australia but whose nationality was recorded as something other than Australian, due to their perceived race. As with all the *Aussie* posters, the photos were taken for exemptions to the dictation test, a function of the White Australia Policy. All of the photographs are from the Australian

National Archive. Ultimately the posters are an opportunity for people on the street to identify with the people featured in the photographs. When we gaze upon the other and feel their gaze returned, we recognise oneself within the other and, for a moment, all boundaries dissolve. I know that sounds a little fanciful but it's truly an everyday event, whenever we feel empathy for another person. That feeling is sometimes painful and sometimes joyful, but always somehow transcendent. We leave behind our atomised self and join the whole. I think that's the power of human imagination. My work just provides an opportunity. However, I'm happy for people to read the posters as they wish. On the one hand they speak to the aspirational ideal of the nation state as an equaliser and unifier. On the other hand they expose the legacy racial prejudice which compromises that ideal. But really such academic notions are secondary, and often offer little more than a means of avoiding feeling. Primarily I hope the posters foster human connection through the image itself and that each portrait shows a spark of the individual's personality, especially their resilience. I think resilience is particularly striking when seen in young people. There's a kind of gentle revenge in the fact that their faces have outlasted the racist policy that prompted their photographs. It must have seemed impossible to them that the world might change in such a way. It reminds us that our world might change in turn."

Peter Drew, peterdrewarts.com

left to right Aussie Poster: Bejah Dervish, PETER DREW. Aussie Poster: Amy Lee Gow, PETER DREW. Aussie Poster: May Ah Cum, PETER DREW





SAFWAT SALEEM

Having grown up in the UAE as an immigrant from Pakistan, before relocating to the US and undergoing a two-decade-long naturalisation process to become an American citizen, visual artist, graphic designer and filmmaker Safwat Saleem's art focuses on the idea of belonging. His *Concerned But Powerless* series combines imagery from vintage advertisements, Urdu typography, and acerbic phrases to create satirical work that explores the social issues foregrounded by the election of Donald Trump.

"The series began in early 2016 as a way for me to process the ongoing presidential election," he recalls. "I had planned to conclude the series on Election Day, but the outcome of the election and events since have implored me to continue the work. Over time, the series has become increasingly desperate."

In one image, a small boy sleeps next to his puppy underneath the charcoal-scrawled text 'That night he dreamt of pizza, cupcakes and a general populace that wasn't so easily manipulated.' In another, a young girl prays as she says 'And I'd also like a pony and world peace and for the privileged to quit confusing equality with oppression.' Elsewhere, a father sits with his children. 'Everything will be okay, he comforted his kids. In some years, the sun will become a red giant, engulf the earth and wipe out all traces of our existence.'

"I use satire and art to bring to light stories of adversity and feel the most at home when making politically-charged satirical work," Saleem continues. "Humour has a way of making difficult topics more approachable. And it is also how I process many of the issues that are on my mind. A lot of what we, as a society, are currently experiencing feels so enormously overwhelming that it helps to have a sense of humour about it."

"My work uses a variety of media, including illustration, writing, animation, audio, film and sculpture. I often combine several media to create multimedia storytelling experiences that get audiences talking – and laughing – about subjects that tend to otherwise make people feel uncomfortable. I gravitate towards art that tells a story, no matter how small. After I've experienced an artwork, the story is what stays with me and so I try to do the same with my own work. By creating a multimedia experience, I don't know if the audience will remember the colours or aesthetics of my work but hopefully they'll remember how the art made them feel, and that is all I can ask for as an artist. Art can tell the kinds of stories that plant seeds in our minds. These stories can grow everlasting roots and slowly change the way we look at the world. My hope for any art is that it can plant a tiny seed that gets the audience to keep thinking about the issue long after they've experienced the work."

While working on the *Concerned But Powerless* series, Saleem became a parent, a factor that played into the wider conversation around belonging at the heart of his work. "It made me think a lot about language. My daughter will know America as her only home, making me wonder about the kind of relationship she will have with my place of birth – Pakistan. This past year I also went through the naturalisation process to become an American citizen. Both these events made me feel like Urdu might be a lost language in my family moving forward, and the culture I grew up with might no longer be a part of my daughter's life, so using Urdu in this series was an attempt to preserve a little bit of my origin story."

Safwat Saleem, safwatsaleem.com

left to right Concerned but Powerless #5 (2016), SAFWAT SALEEM
Concerned but Powerless #9 (2016), SAFWAT SALEEM
Concerned but Powerless #11, (2017), SAFWAT SALEEM
Concerned but Powerless #15 (2018), SAFWAT SALEEM

FAVIANNA RODRIGUEZ

California-based interdisciplinary artist, cultural strategist, and social justice activist Favianna Rodriguez explores notions of migration, gender justice, climate change, racial equity, and sexual freedom in her work. In addition to her expansive studio practice, she is the co-founder and president of The Centre for Cultural Power, a national organisation that empowers artists to disrupt the status quo and ignite change at the intersection of culture and social justice.

“I’ve been exploring themes of social justice since my childhood,” she says. “I grew up in Oakland, California, during the era of the war on drugs. As a kid, I was very disillusioned by the ways in which society failed communities of colour. I witnessed early on the ways in which racism and anti-immigrant sentiment shaped laws and affected my family and community. Although I did not understand it at the time, I felt that the violence, pollution and injustice happening around me was wrong. I also experienced the invisibility of Latinx people in arts, culture, and media.

Art was always a safe place where I could create another reality for myself, despite what was happening around me,” Rodriguez continues. “It was a place where I could tell my story and be my full, authentic self. I formally started my artistic career in 1999 in college. By that point, I was deeply committed to social change work, because I had spent most of my high school years working to transform my school and participating in the growing youth movement that was happening in the Bay Area. Social justice is just so deeply embedded in my creative practice. Every mark on the paper, every decision that I make around colour, shapes and themes are all grounded in my lived experience and my deep desire to be free.

In the current climate of social, economic, sexual, and racial injustice, does Rodriguez believe that art has a *duty* to engage with issues? “Absolutely. I believe that as artists, we have the power to transform culture by transforming the way people think and behave,” she says. “Art is powerful because it leverages the imagination and speaks to our human emotions. Art is not about one issue, it is about a multitude of issues. Art is a reflection of life. The best art reflects moments in our lives and creates a record of them, a form of witness and a way of seeing that moment through a particular lens. In our world today, we face extreme economic inequality, climate chaos, gender inequity, and a migration crisis. The pandemic has demonstrated to us that the system of racial

capitalism is not set up to care for people. It doesn’t foster a safe and healthy society in which each of us – regardless of race, gender or country of origin – can thrive. In the USA, the richest nation in the world, we are witnessing horrific racial disparities around COVID and economic recovery. And, at the global level, we are facing a climate crisis because of an economic system that is extracting from the planet, at a pace that the planet cannot keep up with. Our survival as a human species is at stake. Therefore, art is key in helping us find solutions. Art can soothe us, can expand our imagination, and can help move us towards solutions. The function of art is to transform our minds. I find it really troubling that for hundreds of years we have been centred on the perspective and art of white men. We’ve gotten used to seeing art as a reflection of just *one* kind of lived experience, and that has had real consequences in the kinds of policies that exist in the United States and in the world. Art absolutely has a duty to depict our current realities, because art is precisely the lens through which we can solve things. That’s what I call Cultural Power. We cannot divorce the power of art from the realities of our time, because if we do that, we are subscribing to a very one-sided notion of art, which is a white colonial notion that only centres the experiences of the white elite. That is a system that I refuse to subscribe to.”

“I believe that a lot of the current systems around how we engage with art are broken and inequitable, and set up in a way that BIPOC artists, women artists, LGBTIQ+ artists, and disabled artists face tremendous barriers. I saw this 20 years ago and the challenges continue today. To remedy this, I sought out opportunities with organisations, social movement groups and local governments who wanted to do something different. Today I continue to work in this way. I recently partnered with the City of San Francisco on two public art projects. In the past, the city had worked with predominantly white artists, but they recently adopted a racial justice mandate and that has meant a different way of working. These are exactly the types of interventions we need – full commitment to racial equity and inclusion. At the US-Mexico border, my organisation is helping to train artists on how they can tap into their own cultural power to transform the border region and move away from a solely militarised narrative towards a narrative that celebrates and embraces the beauty of a region in which two cultures come together. I strongly believe that art should not just be about pain, it also must be about joy and the resilience.” ■

