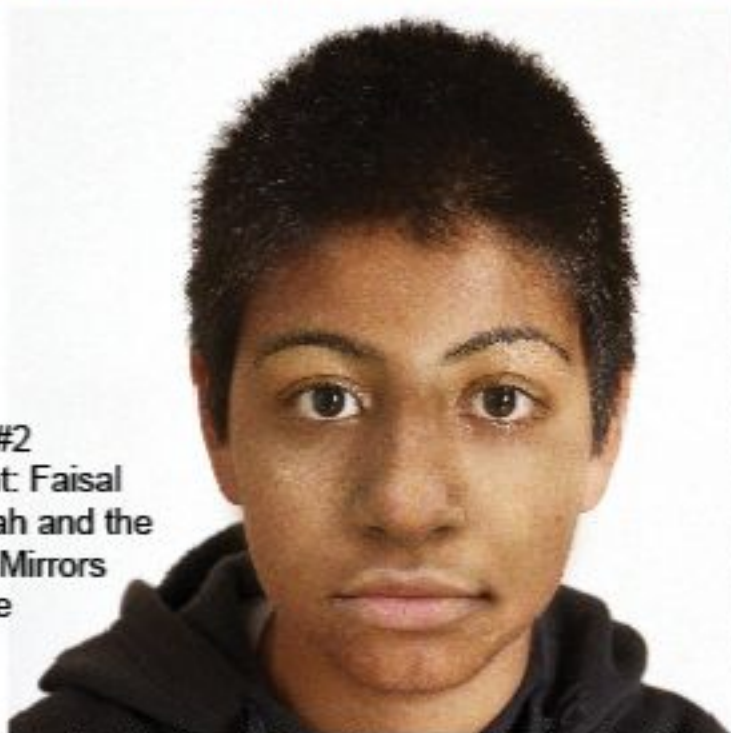


## Chasing Mirrors: London's Arabs Exhibit Work At National Portrait Gallery

Chasing Mirrors is an exhibition of new work exploring alternative forms of self-representation and portraiture by contemporary artist Faisal Abdu'Allah and the Chasing Mirrors Collective, a group of young people from Arabic speaking communities in the North-West London suburbs of Brent, Barnet and Ealing.



An Nisa #2  
Copyright: Faisal  
Abdu Allah and the  
Chasing Mirrors  
Collective

In response to the National Portrait Gallery's Collection, the artists have created reflections of their own identity. Avoiding conventional portraiture, the finished works express differences and similarities

between members of the collective and the viewer in multi-dimensional portraits.

Images on display combine features of the members of the three groups who make up the collective. Each group converges into their own portrait to create a new collective identity.

The exhibition is comprised of large-scale composite photographs, three constantly changing plasma screens, still-lives of personal objects and textual portraits. The plasma

screens show portraits of the individuals from the Collective that change every few seconds. This work encapsulates the idea of the exhibition title Chasing Mirrors: the pursuit of the impossible single defining portrait.

The composite photographs in the exhibition combine the facial features of the members of the three groups who make up the Collective, An-Nisa from Brent, Paiwand and their partners in Barnet, and Tallo in Ealing. All of the groups are from disparate

tallo #1 (detail)  
by Faisal Abdu'Allah  
and the Chasing  
Mirrors Collective  
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Gallery, London and  
the Chasing Mirrors  
Collective





backgrounds and ethnicities but by amalgamating the features of the individuals, the eyebrows of one, the mouth or hair of another, a new portrait is created representing the whole group.

An-Nisa, is a women-managed organisation established in 1985 to promote a British Muslim identity; Paiwand, is an Afghan Community Organisation established to unite and improve the quality of life of the Afghan refugee community in the UK

along with their partners Barnet Refugee Service and Barnet Youth and Connexions; and Tallo, is a community centre on the South Acton Estate which works with the Somali Community including asylum seekers and refugees mainly from Somalia. After the close of the exhibition an archive box containing documentation from the project and original works will be added to the reference collection of the Gallery as a record of the Chasing Mirrors Collective.

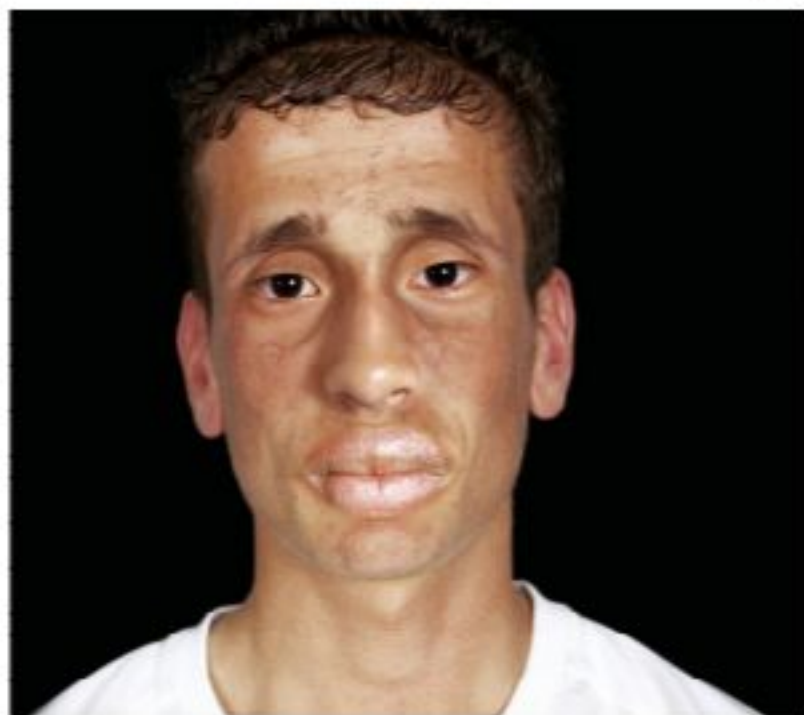


Further portraits in the exhibition are created from still life photographs of personal objects belonging to the Collective. These objects include an iPod, a handbag, a coin and a trainer - blown up and rendered in laser etchings on paper. This presentation of these everyday objects invests them with importance, emphasising the significance of the objects to the individual and illustrates another facet of their identity.

Chasing Mirrors is the first of a

three-year project for the National Portrait Gallery funded by John Lyon's Charity. Each year a new lead artist will collaborate with participants on a series of workshops culminating in an exhibition at the gallery. The project will vary according to the artist's practice, medium and their perspective and response to the gallery's collection, which they will explore with the participants.

Faisal AbdurAllah draws his inspiration from silence. "Silence is a time when I am inspired, totally



Paiwand #1 (c) Faisal AbdurAllah and the Chasing Mirrors Collective



Paiwand #2

Copyright: Faisal Abdu Allah and the Chasing Mirrors Collective

submerged, in my won selfish fantasy. But primarily its the human condition and its struggle to comprehend itself. I am fortunate that my studio is a social space that lends itself to looking, meddling and listening but more importantly a space where kaleidoscopic thought, narrative and contemporary jibe often find their wide into an artifact or, as I would sometimes call it (arty fiction).

The gaze of the subject was the key theme in Chasing Mirrors.

Historically in my practice the eyes are the windows of endearment to the soul best exemplified in (Palwand#1) where the subject looks vacant but retains all the angst of expectation. I think we live in an exciting moment when the screen is the mediator of disparate worlds and ideas. Facebook, digital cameras etc, enable soft participation in contemporary visual culture. Morality is by no means my calling or duty but highlighting how time is negotiated. The transfer of ideas,

images and information creates a more informed and fluid generation that critiques their current position through global devices and networks”

Speaking about his personal life, Faisal said that his parents came to London in the 1960s from Jamaica and his father always reminded him over Sunday dinner (which was the family’s point of reflection) about times when renting private accommodation was problematic.

“Being the subject of attacks from Skinheads and Teddy Boys,

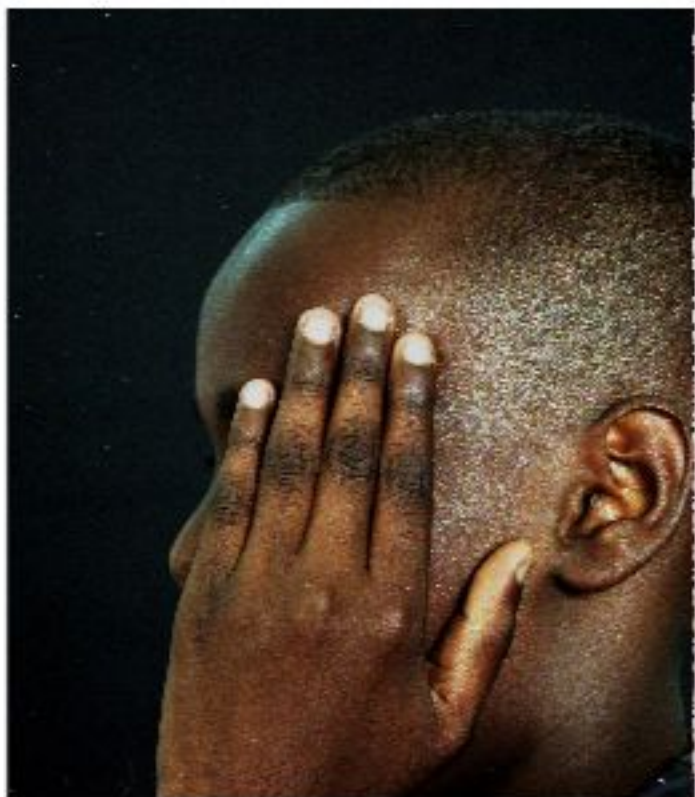
immigrants were not surprised at the signs displayed by landlords stations, no dogs, no Irish and no blacks. “This background made an indelible impression of how I read images and reappropriate my own ideas. In my home as a child the food for the day was survival: you put on a suit of armour before school and you take it off when you return, English on the outside, Jamacian on the inside. That self preservation was the only fibre holding first generation immigrants and rendering them unshakeable. Today he describes London as

Still from story chain # 2  
Copyright:  
Faisal Abdu  
Allah and the  
Chasing Mirrors  
Collective





Still from story chain # 3  
Copyright: Faisal Abdu  
Allah and the Chasing  
Mirrors Collective



both a coleslaw and a salad bowl! Coleslaw is blended with pepper and mayonnaise to create what I perceive as a generic pulp. Salad bowl is different where each ingredient maintains its identity and the difference is appreciated. To amalgamate London would lose that «bendy bus» moment of serenity and escapism.

Faisal Abduallah is a graduate of the Royal College of Art. His work crosses the borders of photography, the printed image and lens-based installation. Interested in brokering disparate world, his work includes *The Garden of Eden* (2003) and more recently *Gold finger* (2007). He has participated in the Sharjah, Torino and Tallinn Biennales and has been the recipient of the Decibel Artist Award in 2005 and recently the first prize at the Tallinn Print Triennial. He is currently in collaboration with Christian Boltanski on *14 years in between*. A senior lecturer in Fine Art at the University of East London, he lives and maintains a studio in London.