

the Whitworth

An Interview with Imran Perretta

A conversation between Imran Perretta and Ali Roche, Head of Commissions, Spike Island, and Emma Moore, Curator: Engagement, Chisenhale Gallery, during production of Perretta's commission *the destructors* in 2019.

Ali Roche: Let's start with the title of your work *the destructors*, which borrows its title from Graham Greene's short story of the same name. How has Greene's story inspired your new work?

Imran Perretta: The Destructors in Greene's story are a group of boys who go about destroying an old man's house during the Blitz. I read it at school, the very same year that the Twin Towers came down, and it has haunted me ever since. What struck me was the parallelism between Greene's narrative about a gang of teenagers known solely for their capacity for violence, and the media portrayal of young, brown men like myself around the advent of the War on Terror.

AR: You've spoken about your own experience during adolescence, of growing into your body and becoming more aware of it. You've also referred to the work as challenging the 'coming of age' story frequently seen in mainstream Hollywood films. Could you talk more about this?

IP: 'Coming of age' has always been a very contested notion in my mind because I remember my adolescence very clearly and it often just felt heavy, nothing like the type of mono-cultural narrative that you see in many mainstream Hollywood movies.

For me, I was being socialised into an adulthood that I wanted no part of and I could feel the weight of these political forces bearing down on me, all without my consent. At the same time, my limbs were growing at this exponential rate and the more I grew, the more I became aware of people's fear of me. I would hear people locking their car doors as I walked by or clutch their purses as they passed me on the street, as if all they were seeing of me was this potential for deviance and destruction. I suddenly became hyper-visible to the authorities too. So my 'coming of age' was coming to know that my body was perceived as a weapon and that because of this, it would never wholly belong to me.

For a lot of young people coming from similar backgrounds, I think this idea of 'becoming' often relates to the slow process of understanding the ways in which they are both seen and unseen as they move through a hostile world. With this comes the inevitable realisation that they lack the agency to control their own visibility in most of the situations they find themselves in. This is a deeply dissonant experience that almost never gets told within the paradigm of the 'coming of age' story yet it is one that many people know intimately.

Emma Moore: Both Greene's short story and your film *the destructors* focus on all male protagonists. Do you think this is a specifically male experience that is presented?

IP: I wrote this work from an embodied point of view, a first-hand testimony that is specific to the body that I inhabit, so the narrative could only truthfully reflect the particular forms of structural violence that I have experienced myself in a post 9/11 world.

However, the intimate experiences of Islamophobia, austerity and state surveillance that are described in the work reflect a broader socio-political situation that affects multiple communities in multiple contexts. In this sense, much of the oral testimony will be familiar to some, even if it does not resemble exactly all the ways in which they have themselves felt dehumanised by the majority and by the State.

AR: In describing the work, you've referred to the 'uncomfortable nexus between austerity and the War on Terror' - could you expand on this?

IP: I think they are thought of differently in that one is seen as a domestic policy and the other is seen as foreign policy but ideologically they exist together. The weaponisation of both in tandem with each other is, in my opinion, the main reason for the social, cultural and economic marginalisation of British Muslim communities, amongst others, across the UK.

AR: Throughout the development of this work you have spoken about the Government's Prevent strategy, which informed the early stages of research around the project. How do you think it has affected young British Muslims in the post 9/11 era?

IP: The Prevent strategy was introduced in the UK in 2003 as part of an overall post 9/11 counter-terrorism approach, CONTEST, with the aim of preventing radicalisation of all forms. In 2015, implementing the Prevent strategy became a legal duty for public sector institutions.

The Prevent strategy has become a way of criminalising an entire community and it has had a huge effect on young people from diverse Muslim backgrounds who are so often suspected as guilty until proven innocent. What is most terrifying to me is how the Government forces teachers, NHS staff and other public sector workers to enforce it, turning ordinary people into agents of the State.

All of my encounters with Prevent have been through law enforcement, both on the street and at border security, and they have been overwhelmingly negative. There is a profound injustice in being targeted by the very state agencies that are supposed to protect you...

EM: And so that protection must come from somewhere else. There is a strong protective figure in the film as Islah, one of the characters, describes a mother's care in the final monologue.

IP: This passage of the film talks about what it means for a child to care for their mother as they have themselves been cared for since birth. Navigating this sort of role reversal is a dissonant experience but it remains the greatest honour of my life and I think other members of my family, who were all carers too, would say the same thing. That is why it was so crushing that the state withdrew their support for us. Against a backdrop of austerity, alienation and the gutting of the NHS, it was a mother's love, a 'divine maternal energy', that kept us together and pulled us through.

EM: There is also a sense of vulnerability to the characters. Islah's monologue mentions 'unthinkable masculinities', could you say something more about this?

IP: This quote relates to how I think the public imaginary in the West has long been haunted by the spectre of the suicide bomber and the idea that lurking within a body like mine is an amoral sociopath waiting to self-destruct. It's a spectre that has followed myself and others since the twin towers came down.

I think my mum understood, long before I did, that this was how I might be seen. Her strategy was to push me every day to remember my softness because she knew that sensitivity was the most radical of tools. She didn't want me to succumb to physicality and violence because she knew that I would be accused of these things anyway. However, she also never tried to deny me my feelings of anger, but tried to help me find an expression that aimed upwards and not at the people around me, all of whom were going through their own struggle. She showed me that loving in a loveless world is the best strategy for survival and, in her absence, I have found this to be true.

AR: Writing forms an integral part of your practice and the monologues in the film are delivered almost as a long form poem, much of which is drawn from your own personal experience. How did you begin writing the script?

IP: I just think that you have to write from a place that you know, certainly as it relates to experiences of subjective trauma. In the past, I have collaborated on projects that address other people's experiences of moving through the world, but the aim is to never try to speak for someone but to let them speak for themselves. This time, the script draws from my own experience and is told through the characters in the work.

My commitment to writing really comes from understanding the limitations of the other forms of visual and sonic language that I'm interested in. There is only so much an image can communicate and the same is true of sound, so text becomes another ingredient in the work. Written language also exists in many different states within the context of the moving-image. For example, through live-action dialogue, voice over or even subtitles, and all of these states can dynamically coexist in interesting ways.

AR: The film's soundtrack also plays a key role in creating a sense of dissonance in the work. Could you talk about how you work with sound?

IP: The sound in this work is not just about creating an ominous atmosphere but also something about feelings of anxiety and grief. The percussive elements in the work are spread across the surround sound field, sometimes coming from behind you and sometimes coming from the side or the front speakers, as though there is a presence out of frame moving through the space. This is something you often hear in horror movie soundtracks, though in the destructors, the sound design is not about evoking fear but about intimate feelings of angst and paranoia. It is really about trying to sonify a visceral and dissonant emotional state.

However, there are moments where the soundtrack is more consonant and melodic, such as the score for the final monologue. Droning below the musical and percussive elements of the soundtrack are shifting 'shepard tones', tones that appear to continuously swell, building a tension and suspense that never resolves itself. I think I have always been interested in the psychoacoustic tropes of mainstream cinema. However, for me, the most important use of shepard tones in *the destructors* was to try and reference, in an abstract way, modern-day 'forever wars' such as the War on Terror.

EM: You use many unconventional angles throughout the film, the characters are obscured as the camera frames just below the nose or over the shoulder. Why have you framed the shots in this way?

IP: When making this work I had Judith Butler's book, *Frames of War* in my head, and this had a massive impact on how I conceived the visual language of the film. The text talks about this idea of framing as a means of controlling the way in which politically sensitive imagery is understood and disseminated. Butler describes the camera almost like a weapon that, through framing and cropping, has the power to control narrative through what falls in and out of frame. By strategically cropping an image, you can evacuate it of its context and therefore precisely render its meaning. So, something simple like framing out a victim of violence from a photograph, or a visible landmark that could reveal the location of a war crime becomes a surgical tool for the powerful to precisely control the canon of imagery around their abuses. For me, in a post 9/11 world where certain groups of people are relentlessly surveilled, both by the public and the authorities, the idea of using the frame to crop or obscure their personhood represented an opportunity to reclaim agency through anonymity.

The two-channel format of the destructors is also integral as it allows me to show multiple angles of the live action simultaneously; both to communicate the insidious feeling of being watched and to further

fragment its visual language. All of these gestures really are an attempt to wrest some measure of value away from the traditional, cinematic image-making and towards a more complex visibility.

EM: In the production phase of the project you connected with young people from the local area around Chisenhale Gallery in east London where there is a large British Bangladeshi community. How did these conversations come about?

IP: The round table discussions we had with young people were brilliant. I worked with two amazing organisations to facilitate the discussions, Jawaab and Mile End Community Project, both of whom are dedicated to social justice in the community. Together we were all able to create a safe space, free of judgment, where everyone could talk openly about the issues affecting them.

Everything was up for discussion and this was not something that any of us are used to, but the discourse was incredibly meaningful from a personal point of view. It made me feel like I had support in my own experience as there were people around me that had seen and felt similar things, and this is what gave me the strength to write. For the young people, I think it was a great opportunity to reflect on their own narrative and respond to it artistically. The workshops resulted in a brilliant week-long exhibition at Chisenhale Gallery of work that the young people produced. That was a joy to be involved with and is something that I want to make sure will have a legacy beyond the run of *the destructors*.

AR: The film was shot at the Shadwell Centre in Tower Hamlets, east London. The building used to be a school but now functions as community centre; can you say something about the significance of the setting?

IP: The Shadwell Centre has an amazing history of serving the community. It has been a primary school, a youth hub, an adult learning centre and everything in-between, providing vital counselling and education services to the local community. However, as with many other council-run facilities, it has been criminally underfunded by the government, and so it is slowly falling into disrepair.

I wanted to cast the building as a protagonist in the work as well as the backdrop for the characters in the film to enact the communal care and support that persists despite the Tory government and its assault on economically marginalised communities in the UK.

Despite significant challenges, the staff at the Shadwell Centre are absolutely amazing and keep the place open come rain or shine. However, there is a limit to what they can achieve under ongoing austerity measures that have decimated almost all forms of public provision in the borough and beyond.

AR: You allude to this neglect of community and the building through a series of VFX interventions: the building fills with water and smoke filters in through vents and the windows. Could you talk about your use of computer-generated imagery, which is something that recurs in your work?

IP: The ingress of smoke and water into the building was about drawing attention to the porosity of the building and its gradual decay. The community centre is intended to be a sanctuary for local people, a safe space, so the idea of the building slowly succumbing to insidious outside forces was an important visual metaphor for me.

I've always been very interested in VFX simulation and the way that it can add an uncanny and unsettling feeling to a scene that is somehow recognisable but couldn't ordinarily exist, like water slowly flooding a hallway or acrid smoke coming from an air conditioning unit. There is something about this that I always think of as having a relationship to Magic Realist literature, where the supernatural or the hyperreal becomes a way of trying to communicate the most unspeakable of traumas, such as conflict or colonialism. Both austerity and the War on Terror are borne of these violent histories, so conjuring a visual

language that describes conflict without explicitly showing it is something that is very important to this film and all of the rest of my work.

EM: As we follow the young men in your film, there is a sense of community and strength between them. They perform the monologues in isolation, but as a group they form a network of support for one another. Is there hope in the sense of community within the film?

IP: Now that we are facing another five years of Tory rule, it has become more critical than ever to find hope. Against this backdrop, my own hope is that the destructors is a reminder of the power of an indomitable will to live; to survive the circumstances we find ourselves in, however desperate, with dignity and strength. It is in radical acts of care and community, of resilience and collective spirit, that we are best able to bear the weight of each other in the knowledge that the state will not.

I want the next five years to be about more than survival in the face of a ruling class that would rather people like me didn't exist. Let us find hope and work towards something new.

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