

## 1. FIRST IMPRESSIONS COUNT

**M**y grandfather always said that the state of someone's shoes tells you a great deal about their character. I think he had in mind that I should be eternally wary of poor leather maintenance or untied shoelaces, that scuffed suede was a window into a wretched soul consumed by degrading perversions and twisted fantasies. But, unlike my grandfather, I've always been suspicious of those with overly maintained shoes. I know that, in today's foot obsessed world, this heretical statement puts me in grave danger of being beaten to death by an army of Nike wielding foot fetishists, but I can't help it – I just don't trust people who lavish money and time on their feet (my favourite anti-globalization slogan, *Fuck Nike*, has added resonance for me). Fortunately, on first meeting Saâdane Afif, he was wearing a pair of worn-out trainers, just like me. First impressions count – I instantly liked him.

Now shoes are shoes, but art, well... We (as in we who are apparently in the know) *should* know that it is imperative for us to go beyond making judgements based on such banal, trifling things as surface appearances. Instantaneous responses, enthusiastic recommendations are to be treated with the proper, respectful suspicions (fashionably known as 'critical thinking'). Art is, after all, a slow burn. Apparently, the greatest works of art take time to weave their magic, to lodge themselves in our brain and heart...

My response to Afif's work, though, was instantaneous. Unusually, it made me happy. It gave me pleasure. The reasons for this pleasure are manifold. Perhaps most importantly for me, Afif's avowed refusal to be pigeon-holed as this or that kind of artist struck a chord. Consequently, his practice possesses a breadth and ambition which is both deeply refreshing and inspiring. Here is an artist who finds the straightjacket of much professional 'art' inherently limiting and reductive. He doesn't specialize in anything (other than being an artist) and while the formal range of his operations is arresting, the fact that he is also capable of switching modes of address to the viewer is all the more impressive. His formally diverse practice, oscillating between sculpture, photography, interventions, installations and text, brings with it a shifting tone of address. This polyphonic flavour sees Afif switch from poetic absurdity to playful irreverence, from a barbed, political and social commentary to a fantastical reimagining of everyday life. As this catalogue demonstrates, Afif is an artist capable of (and more importantly committed to) speaking in a variety of different voices.

However, while a breadth of ambition marks his work, there is in all his pieces a consistent sense of a direct immersion in the contingencies of the everyday. In common with many artists in Britain during the last ten years, Afif has displayed a desire to open the floodgates and pour some of the raw blood of everyday life into the dry, academic body of conceptualism. Afif's is a body of work saturated and ripe with the conflicts, paradoxes and confusions of day-to-day living, work suffused with a desire to communicate as many of the distinct and different experiences of contemporary reality as is humanly possible. Occasionally, then,

the work, reflecting life, is beguiling, poetic and magical (as in “*World is beautiful and sad isn’t it?*”), at other times stark and confrontational (as in his crude daubing of the slogan “*Ricchi o poveri, belli o brutti, tutti uguali nella tomba*” on the walls in Turin p. 54-55). But it is perhaps Afif’s absurdist humour that is his trump card. When I first saw his absurd three-dimensional model of the ocean sea, I chuckled with delight; the ultimate monument to an impossible feat, an unrealized (or unrealizable) project. It reminded me of Maurizio Cattelan’s remark: “*this is the one profession in which I can be a little bit stupid, and people will say, ‘oh you are stupid, thank you, thank you for being so stupid’.*”

## 2. ON THE ROAD AGAIN

**S**aâdane Afif is patently a very curious man. This is not a bad thing. Too few people today are genuinely gripped by an inquisitive disposition. After all, genuine curiosity has a child-like quality, what the writer Jorge Luis Borges called an ‘invulnerable innocence’. Because of this innate curiosity, Saâdane likes to listen, talk and look. He also needs to travel. As far as I can tell, he is somewhat nomadic. I once asked him why he had come to Glasgow. After all, few come to Glasgow without a reason, a motive (a solid professional reason – like doing a residency, having a show). He didn’t have a good solid professional reason. I think he just wanted to hang out and see what was happening. I suppose in these days of intense rationalization of time and energy, this probably sounds somewhat indulgent, but I think there’s a lot to be said for soaking up another culture, in seeing how, in Primo Levi’s words, “other people are constructing their own lines of resistance to human misery”.

## 3. YOU’RE INNOCENT WHEN YOU DREAM

**S**ometimes it’s just too darn difficult to take life seriously. Those of us with long enough memories might have mistakenly thought that President Reagan’s crazed reign as commander in chief of fortress America would never be surpassed for sheer surreal flights of Armageddon-flavoured absurdism. But we were wrong. George Bush junior has now picked up the baton. Look at the diminutive chimp, then try looking in the mirror and not chuckling with absurdist relish. However hard you might try to imagine a character as moronic as Bush, you couldn’t. Now go and do your day’s work, knowing that he’s got his finger poised over the button.

I get the feeling Saâdane Afif has always found it hard not to grin with warped, demented, dark pleasure at the skewed reality his brain is constantly confronted with. For Afif, although the weird and the worrying may well populate the charcoal cityscape that lies outside his bedroom window, it does at least provide him with suitable material for making art. Consequently, he is always busy producing things, because he can’t help but find the whole of his life filled with lucrative incentives to create. He has taken it upon himself to remake the odds and sods of daily life, conjuring up his own handmade worlds, into which he is prone to retreat at a moment’s notice.

After all, Afif is, in part, an itinerant dreamer, a fantasist. This is an artist who re-imagined a gallery, with torrents of water cascading out of its windows. This is an artist who opened a show by closing a gallery, wrenching all the lights off the ceiling, covering the exterior with fly posters and generally making it look finished as a cultural marketplace. And lastly, this is an artist who created a miniature model of Eden stuck between the earphones of two psychedelic patterned headphones.

[1] Adam Philips "Houdini's Box  
– on the arts of escape"  
published by Faber and Faber,  
2001.

In Adam Philips' book "Houdini's Box – on the arts of escape"<sup>1</sup>, the author attempts to unravel why it is that we are so obsessed with ideas of escape, yet so dismissive of mere escapism. For Philips the notion of escapism has received a bum rap: he takes issue with the idea that "*strength of character can be straightforwardly equated with the direction in which we run*" that "*our best selves approach, the timid, the lazy, the deceitful retreat*". Philips' book attempts to offer a more sympathetic account of the impulse to escape, highlighting "*why we cannot describe ourselves without also describing what we need to escape from, and what we want to escape to*".

Saādane Afif shares Philips' sense of escapism as something more than simple avoidance. His escapist fictions highlight that while it may be easy to disregard escape and fantasy as empty or sleight, this is to miss the potential such daydreams have for capturing a warped sense of truth. It is also to grasp what the film critic Andy Medhurst meant when he remarked "*to use the term escapist as a put-down reveals that anyone who does so leads a comfortable life that requires no escaping from*".

Some people feel guilty and ashamed about their imaginative fancies of escape, not Afif. He proudly offers them up for public consumption.

- 4 "IN SCHOOL / ALL THOUGHTS GOT COMBED OUT / WHAT WAS LEFT WAS LIKE A FIELD" JOHN ASHBERRY  
"IN CUBA AFTER THE REVOLUTION, LIFE ITSELF WILL BE AN EDUCATION" FIDEL CASTRO

I recently became a pedagogue. Sounds nasty, doesn't it? Via e-mail, I communicated to a friend of mine my unexpected appearance on a university payroll. "*You know what I think about university education*", was the sharp reply. I knew what he meant. He wasn't being uncharitable; I knew he was pleased that every month there were going to be three numbers in front of a digital point on my bank statement. Rather he was plainly expressing his long-held suspicions regarding the value of 'democratic' educational institutions.

My own experiences of education could most favorably be described as variable. Comprehensive schooling in an inner city school was, as you'd expect: routinely brutal (although there were isolated moments of inspiring teaching). However, the real shock came on entering the promised land of university art education. Instead of a wondrous vista of intellectual stimulation, a barren desert confronted me. In six years of degree and master's education, I liberally calculate I spent no more than two weeks in conversation with tutors.

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Because of this dissatisfying experience, the problem of education subsequently consumed me. Having felt bored and out of place during the majority of my formal 'training', I developed a somewhat uncontrollable appetite to devour critical texts on the ideology of education. Ivan Illich's celebrated discussion of the "hidden curriculum" was a suitable starting point (Illich's ideas concerning the 'hidden curriculum' are to be found in his book "Deschooling Society" Marion Boyars Publishers Paperback – June 1996). Illich argued that schools/universities taught a great deal that had nothing to do with the explicit formal content of education. In his analysis, they inculcated what he termed a passive consumption – which essentially amounted to an uncritical acceptance of the social order and its authority. In western capitalist societies this amounted to an ideological domestication of the populace: Margaret Thatcher's infamous slip that the purpose of education was to teach children to know their place and sit still in it, in other words.

Illich's analysis of educational institutions as highly ideological cogs in the management of society was further developed and critically expanded upon by authors such as Paul Willis. In his seminal examination of the educational trajectories of a group of working boys in a Birmingham school (entitled "Why Working Class Children Get Working Class Jobs"), Willis highlighted the fate of those pupils who, having identified Illich's 'hidden curriculum', rebelled against the school's authority. Although this group of boys was smart enough to discern the operations of power within the school's structure, Willis' book made it clear that despite their mutual determination to fight back, they too were largely destined for unrewarding, predetermined roles. In Willis' book, education's role in helping to reproduce already existing inequalities of class, gender and race was finely detailed. The French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu further revealed the role education plays in what he termed 'cultural reproduction'; the manner in which education manages to strengthen the feelings of belonging in some, and the feelings of alienation in others.

Reading these texts, as well as others (Noam Chomsky's "Mis-Education" and Paulo Freire's book "Pedagogy of the Oppressed") was both revelatory and dispiriting. Belatedly, I at least possessed some conception of why I'd felt angry and frustrated by education. But equally, it was hard not to feel deeply dejected by the apparent, crushing inevitability of the system. After all, those who slip through the net are becoming fewer and far between.

A banal truth, but discussion regarding such topics as democracy or education only occurs at times of crisis. Today is such a period of crisis. With McDonald's sponsoring classrooms, education's 'hidden' role as an ideological component of global capitalism, has become increasingly naked and explicit. And of course, the infestation of corporate ethics in primary and secondary education is matched by the alarming direction of universities. Frequently more concerned with business and management than innovation and inspiration, the university has been remodeled as a business primarily geared towards offering training for business. This extends to art schools. Far from critically resistant islands of counter-cultural values, art schools have also largely internalized the logic of capital. In such a situation re-imagining

how information is communicated, reconsidering who is sanctioned to do this and where this is permitted to occur, increasingly looks like a necessity.

## 5. HOUSES ARE NOT HOMES

I worry about my brain sometimes. It seems capable of dredging up apparently random memories in apparently incoherent combinations. Yesterday, Evel Knievel's ill-fated attempt to jump thirteen double-decker buses at Wembley in 1975, and my first visit to the South-East London estate of Thamesmead popped into my mind. At first, I couldn't decipher the connection. Then it emerged, the recollection of a sense of dread and excitement, of horror and euphoria. The catalyst? Saādane showing me a picture of one of his improbable edifices.

Visiting Thamesmead in 1976 and seeing Knievel jump were defining moments. Up until this point, my childish hunger for the escapist thrills of the unknown had contented itself with films and comics. However, Knievel and Thamesmead were the real thing. Thamesmead was an urban landscape so compellingly alien that it seemed like the entire enterprise had been orchestrated with the film industry in mind. And of course, in 1972, Stanley Kubrick spotted the potential when he made "*A Clockwork Orange*" there. Meanwhile, Knievel's ill-fated jump at Wembley was a moment of such sublime stupidity, it thrilled my soul. His makeshift, crudely constructed, highly improbable ramp, which crawled its way up the banks of terraces at Wembley, remains, to this day, my favourite folly. In a world of fools, Knievel took stupidity to new heights and then royally landed on his rear.

Thamesmead was built in 1965, at great expense, and regarded, in its time, as the stand-out example of the new town. Designed to house 60,000 it was the ultimate, planned idealization of how social life could be organized. Built on reclaimed marshland, next to the largest and oldest sewage plant in London, the subsoil permutation of seeping sewage and water led to the planners building the concrete towers around and on top of a network of lakes and canals. Enormous, grey, rectangular box flats sat upon what seemed to me, as a child, dangerously spindly sticks of concrete planted in the lakebeds. At school it was jokingly referred to as Concrete Venice. As a child, I fantasized that perhaps Knievel could orchestrate a jump there. Thamesmead appeared to possess a natural sympathy with Evel's amateur spectacular. They both reveled in an embrace of incongruity; the space between the dream and the reality. In Thamesmead, herons, swans and fishes populated the dirty, dark waters of the lakes and canals, alongside the burnt out cars, fridges and shopping trolleys. A boater would glide past on the lake just as a fridge was thrown out of a window into the water. This was the Thamesmead experience, the often alarmingly close butting up of beauty and brutality.

Although the planners got it badly wrong, and Knievel was a supreme moron, there was something remarkable about their joint, resolute optimism in the face of overwhelming odds of failure. Both Knievel and the Thamesmead planners failed by virtue of their excess of ambition

and confidence. Today town planners and entertainers fail because of their modesty. I'd rather have my heroes dumb but ambitious and my housing excessive, not polite – whatever the consequences.

## 6. FIRE AND WATER

**O**ne day in the late 1980s I found myself trawling around the Royal Academy Gallery in London. The occasion was their latest attempt to describe and package an artistic movement. The reason for my visit was my imminent entry into art education (I was young, eager and confused). This particular international blockbuster proclaimed to describe the history of Pop Art. Its size and bluster made me tired and I became both emotionally and intellectually spent. But just as I began my descent into despair and despondency at gallery culture (heightened by visiting a large public gallery) I rounded one of the corners in the lofty marbled columned hall and staggered into Ed Ruscha's 1965 painting "The Los Angeles County Museum on Fire".

Ruscha's painting lifted my spirits and encapsulated my sentiments exactly. The title is suitably deadpan/does what it says on the tin – the picture is of the museum on fire. Oh my God! The unthinkable!... Well, not that unthinkable.

I'd long harbored secret doubts about the special experience of visiting museums. I'd begun to think I was a secret philistine. The happiness I felt on seeing a picture of a public museum on fire convinced me I was right. It was simultaneously a moment of epiphany and doubt. I was, after all, just about to start the process of training to become an artist.

As time galloped onwards and I matured (or 'went off' depending who you are) my feelings of antipathy were recast by pragmatism and success. Becoming an exhibiting artist meant I had to reign in my philistine tendencies (how successfully I have done this is another story, of course). It's not done to publicly criticize the system that pays, albeit infrequently and very poorly, your bills. Not that it's not nice to be reminded of a time when you could still fantasy with impunity.

## 7. ART AND POP

**H**ysterical fears regarding the corrupting power of popular culture have pervaded intellectual and artistic thought in the 20th century. Post-second world war, Greenberg's pronouncements concerning the imminent defeat of 'high art' at the hands of a tidal wave of kitsch, coupled with Theodore Adorno's analysis of the alienating properties of mass-produced entertainment (the culture industry as he termed it), resulted in a fairly strong consensus as to the evils of mass culture.

However, with the explosion of youth culture in the late 1950s, the established cultural

order was challenged and for some the perspective changed. Rather than rubbish the new mediums of film, television and pop music (as many self-professed elitists such as TS Eliot did), some artists and intellectuals sought, in differing ways, to rescue this new media from neglect and derision. In art, pop turned its attention to the icons of baby boom consumerism, Elvis and Marilyn, while intellectuals, especially those resident at Birmingham University's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, staked a claim for a broader, less divisive conception of culture. Raymond Williams' "Culture and Society" and Richard Hoggart's "The Uses Of Literacy" stand as seminal texts in this academic discovery of the culture of 'everyday' people. Suddenly academics and artists realized that not all 'ordinary people' (as they are often contemptuously referred to) are brain dead zombies comatosed by (or uncritically and passively absorbing) the corrupting, alienating effects of television, cinema, fashion, pop music, newspapers...

Today, bookshops heave under the weight of critical analysis of everything from TV soaps to mopeds. Anything, it seems, can now go into a Ph.D. thesis or the pages of art magazines like *Frieze*. The positive legacy of cultural theorists such as Hoggart, Williams and later Stuart Hall and Dick Hebdige (as with the artists of Pop Art) was that they significantly helped to expand the range of what could (and should) be considered worthy of the name of 'Culture'. However, old prejudices die hard.

Although popular culture has been intellectually and artistically rehabilitated, this cultural redemption is still compromised by the ghoulish spectre of money. Popular cultures whoring with corporate pimps has necessitated that all analysis has to be carried out under controlled, sterile conditions. Intellectual and artistic thought has to be protected from contamination by crass commercialism (of course, art isn't commercial or a business!). In art, this has often resulted in the appropriation (a favourite postmodern buzzword) of popular cultural forms possessed of a highly anaemic flavour. Because it is supposed to go without saying that only 'Art' has the capacity for critique (i.e. while popular culture has none), artists who get too close to popular culture are deemed to be in mortal danger of sacrificing art's potential for critique. Consequently, to protect themselves against the dangers of falling through the critical safety net, artists and academics are required to stress their critical distance from the material being used. Every tentative step towards the popular has to be followed by an over-compensatory gesture of resistance to it, a theatrical statement of arts needs to rid itself of any philistine tendencies in entertainment and commerce. The usual trick is to adopt the guise of an anthropologist, talk about deconstruction (should that be dissection?) and generally give no hint of actually taking any pleasure or enjoyment from the film, TV program, item of fashion... which is under the artistic microscope.

The case of video art is a good example. To ensure viewers are under no delusions that what they are seeing is ART and NOT television or cinema, proper video art has to be boring: black and white or muted colours, slowly paced, no sound and of course minimal editing

(leaving a camera on a tripod to record thirty minutes of performance is obligatory it seems). Not all video is, of course, like this. Artists like Bruce Nauman or Stan Douglas aren't scared of getting their hands dirty with a bit of editing, color, sound, pace, all the 'terrifying' elements of commercial cinema. Crucially, they still manage to make something that is art – not simply a rehash of commercial TV or cinema. However, the fact that the elements of cinema and TV that which make it pleasurable, entertaining and popular, exist within the work makes their work stronger. Nobody could call their work anaemic.

Rather than conceive of artists' relationship to popular culture as one in which their capacity for critical reflection is extinguished by the terrors of popular culture, perhaps it is more profitable, at this historical junction, to see today's artists as entangled in the operations of power, exploitation and seduction, which they are not blind to but submit to nonetheless. Fundamentally, this is a more complex relationship with the broader culture; instead of keeping the pleasures (however potentially alienating) away from the confines of the white cube, many artists have sought to openly reveal their own engagement (as consumers perhaps) of these previously sullied forms. Permitting the denigrated pleasures of popular culture within such spaces allows any artist to become a potential partisan of the least prestigious forms of pleasure and attention within culture.

If artists also stress their own love (love after all is capable of stomaching unsavory, unpalatable elements) for the forms of popular culture, they go some way to developing a stronger identity for popular culture within art. In this view, engagement with the stuff and fluff of popular culture doesn't require an artist to adopt an either/or position. It doesn't mean that the artist has to pretend that consumer culture is innocent, presents no danger, or has no unctuous effects. And conversely, it doesn't require them to adopt an anthropological, distanced position which examines clubbers or ballroom dancers like ants under a microscope. Just as sociologists have argued cogently that it is implausible to treat the consumers of popular culture merely as 'dupes', so, with this approach, the artist's subjection to the pleasures of popular culture is never as passive as it may seem – never the complete extinguishing of agency, responsibility and self-determination that populist abandon threatens. What this approach does do is identify artists with the subjects of popular culture, rather than distinguish him from them as an artist, intellectual or critic.

The writer Slavoj Zizek has claimed to make the same identification himself: *the idiot for whom I endeavor to formulate a theoretical point as clearly as possible is ultimately myself*<sup>2</sup>. And again, lining up the sublime with the ridiculous, Zizek says, *I am convinced of my proper grasp of some Lacanian concept only when I can translate it successfully into the inherent imbecility of popular culture*<sup>3</sup>. Zizek, in effect, takes us full-circle in our understanding of the relationship between theory and popular culture. No more is the intellectual inviting us merely to keep our eyes and ears open for the rare occasions on which popular culture can present us with little gems or, conversely, how radical theory can be used to decode the

<sup>[2]</sup> Slavoj Zizek, *Metastases of Enjoyment*, Verso, 1994, p. 175.

<sup>[3]</sup> *Ib.*



cryptic resistance which popular culture harbors in its difference from official and elevated culture. Zizek doesn't even settle for the relativistic or populist celebration of popular pleasures. Neither does he deny that popular culture is, or might be, imbecilic. What is important about Zizek's account of the relationship between theory and popular culture is that instead of using intellectual categories and values to enlighten us about the neglected significance of cinema, TV, haircuts and trainers, Zizek uses banal and imbecilic culture to test the categories and values of social theory. None of this implies that popular culture has finally become legitimate or legitimating, but it does suggest that the old prejudices against it have been discredited at least to the point that we can refer to it without assuming or confirming its worthlessness. Zizek does not dismantle the hierarchies of cultural division but he is attempting to establish new and less divisive relations between theory and popular culture. If it was once thought that pleasure – especially popular pleasure – ought to be monitored and restrained by the enlightened law of the intellect, then Zizek, and indeed any young artist willing to get his or her hands dirty, has learned that love is another form of intelligence. Loving popular culture is not the antidote to the elitist or radical rejection of it, but love (or fandom, enthusiasm, infatuation) certainly sees what critique is blind to.

It would be stupid to pretend that some of the fears about popular culture are unfounded. Popular culture isn't uncontaminated by the stench of filthy lucre. But pretending that art somehow is pure and miraculously exists beyond such pollution is folly. Art and artists are as entangled as everyone else. Cultural division and the hierarchies of pleasure has meant that intellectual culture has failed to have any love for popular culture, and the resistance to cultural division permits love where there once was none. Learning about popular culture is not enough; learning to love it is a good start.

#### 8. MONEY IS SHIT

**S**ometimes there's a great pleasure to be had in encountering an artwork that makes no concessions to subtlety, refinement, or good manners. This is such a piece.

#### 9. GOD BLESS MONGRELS

"Fascists make bad chemists because they can't stand impurities" Levi

**I** know many artists who are fans of all kinds of popular cultural forms – music, film etc. and who, in the spirit of the time, produce works which are marketed as being 'about' these cultural forms (work about techno music and the communities which revolve around the Glasgow clubbing scene is a good example). Unfortunately, these works are often so resolutely purged of any signs of pleasure and enjoyment that it's difficult to connect the person who has made the artwork with the person who enthuses privately. Something gets lost in the translation. Something gets denied entry into art.

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I think the question of why interesting people, full of passion and enthusiasm for popular cultural forms become dull artists, revolves around a sense of cultural pedigree. More precisely, a sense of an absence of cultural pedigree in the materials and means of popular culture. Basically, the methods which popular cultural forms use to communicate, methods, lest we should forget, bred under commercial nurturing, are soiled because they seem to go for the quick fix of instant gratification. If the means of transmission are treated with scant respect, then the forms of attention they encourage are even more devoid of pedigree. Laughing out loud, shrieking with terror, sexual arousal; these are not responses welcomed in galleries.

Within aesthetics, there exists a hierarchy of pleasure which has (and continues) to order art; the visceral, physical, emotional, sexual (more often than not the pleasures of the body) occupy a lowly position. It's something like an intellectual orthodoxy that immersion for both the artist and the audience in these pleasures would contaminate the purity of an artistic project. It would distract the mind via the quick fix of appealing to the body. So bright artists, with passionate cultural loves, suck the life from their work, empty all the pleasure and present soulless, dry critiques/deconstructions of their passions – they're all David and no Delacroix. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu refers to this kind of self-censorship as "an ontological complicity – a pre-reflexive fit". Frequently, it comes across as a strange kind of self-administered autopsy; artists dissect (deconstruction – so much to answer for) the mediums they privately enjoy, but for professional purposes would never admit to. It's a kind of schizophrenia, built on self-censorship, cultural divisions and an acquired, hidden, inculcated sense of artistic propriety.

If this sense of artistic propriety is destructive within the realm of the artist, then the consequences for audiences attracted by the banner of inclusiveness are often disastrous. Those hoping for artwork capable of addressing the complex pleasures of consuming, at once as alienating as they are pleasurable, are frequently disappointed by artwork purged of any signs of entanglement. Pedigree demands aloofness, but aloofness is of little use when trying to communicate.

However, if artists hankering over an outdated ideal of artistic purity are likely to purge their work of enthusiasm, passion, desire, fantasy, anger, horror in the name of demonstrating pedigree, mongrels – those artists who embrace their mixed up cultural identity – are more than happy to let in some of these undistinguished pleasures. After all, purity means nothing to them. If some keep their cultural passions away from the arena of art, mongrels empty them into the pot. The interaction of disparate elements, different kinds of pleasure, different cultural interests and passions, these factors help make their work dynamic. The sublime, the cerebral, the contemplative – the traditional elements of legitimate art (at least in the 20th century – but that's another story) are placed in solution with the pleasures of popular enjoyment – horror, humour... Crucially, mongrels are more than happy for their audience to embrace a range of responses, not just the disinterested, sublime, nuanced, cerebral

pleasures of High Art. Mongrels are just as likely to trigger repulsion, arousal, laughter and excitement in conjunction with the more established responses of art. Mongrels understand William Blake's statement: "enjoyment and not abstinence is the food of intellect".

We need more mongrels. Pedigree and purity – ostriches with their heads stuck in the sand, these we can do without: If artists want an art which is simultaneously capable of being popular, accessible and complex, while holding out some hope for resisting power, they at least need to demonstrate some idea of why exactly popular culture mediums are popular – they need to demonstrate some grasp of how and why popular cultural forms are pleasurable. After all, as Oscar Wilde said "pleasure is the only thing worth having a theory about". I hope he doesn't take offense, but from my perspective, Saādane Afif is a first class mongrel. God bless mongrels!

#### 10. RESTORE HOPE

**W**hereas much recent art's engagement with its broader culture has amounted to little more than poetic, whispered tales of cozy alienation, Afif's work, despite its often cool minimalist aesthetic, is suffused with a vibrant sense of anger and passion at the inequalities of his culture. Thankfully, this strain of resistance isn't couched in the securities of committed political radicalism – too much humour for one thing.

It has become an ubiquitous strategy of late to give a spin of political radicalism to, what are in essence, highly apolitical, formalist works, by invoking the spirit of 1968. Repeatedly, exhibitions are crammed with references and allusions to the 'glorious failure' of '68. While many contemporary artists frequently appear content to settle for the inevitable impasse of the current political situation, Saādane Afif has at least attempted to instill a contemporary, recast political dimension and edge to his work. In this respect, he gives short shrift to those connoisseurs of failure, looking to rake over the death of 'big ideas'.

Some quotes have stayed imbedded in the deepest recesses of my mind. In the cerebral treacle through which all my thoughts poodle, one quote retains a peculiar power to make itself heard. Theodore Adorno is the author, the book is "Minima Moralia" and the section is, suitably enough, "Johnny head in the air". Here's the quote:

*"The almost insoluble task is to let neither the power of others, nor our own powerlessness, stupefy us."*

At times of stress, despondency and fatalistic gloom, I find the old curmudgeon's assertion of defiance in the face of overwhelming odds strangely contemporary and encouraging.

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