

BRADFORD

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Life

Perfect match

Traditional and modern meet at wedding show

Identity in focus

Exhibition hopes to start conversation

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“ I DIDN'T WANT TO MAKE PORTRAITS THAT MADE YOU FEEL SORRY FOR THESE YOUNG MEN. I WANTED TO SHOW THAT DESPITE THE PRESSURES, THESE MEN HAVE STILL FOUND A WAY TO HOLD THEMSELVES UP AS PROUD AND DIGNIFIED PEOPLE, ALBEIT WITH COMPLEX AND OFTEN CONFLICTING IDENTITIES ”



Final preparations for the You Get Me? exhibition at Impressions Gallery in Bradford

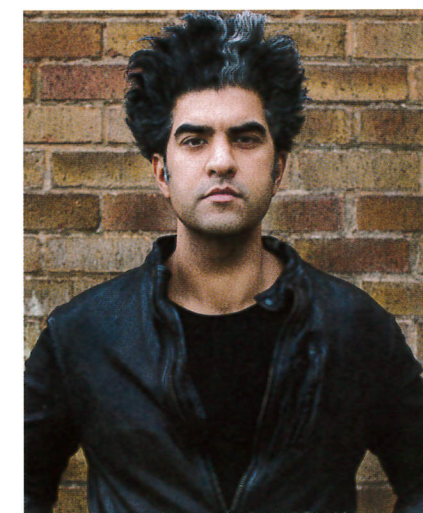
FRAMING FACES THAT REFLECT ASIAN IDENTITIES



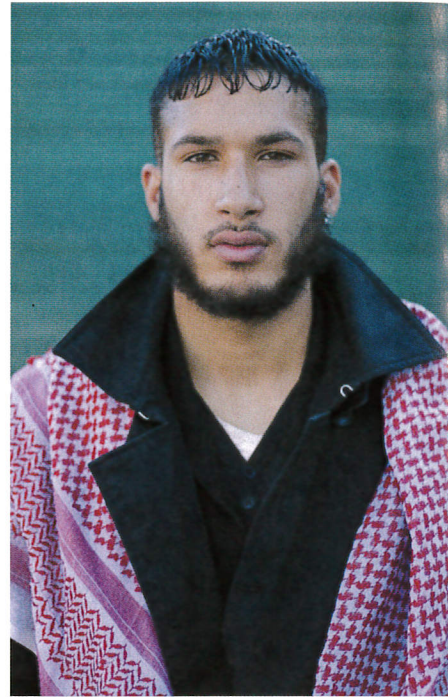
BY CHRIS YOUNG

An acclaimed photographer hopes his latest exhibition, currently on show in the city centre, will inspire conversations about identity in Bradford's Asian community. *You Get Me?* is a collection of photographs by Mahtab Hussain that have been taken over a nine-year period. The exhibition opened at Impressions Gallery in City Park last month. The photographs explore the question of identity among young, working-class British Asian men and boys. Glasgow-born Mahtab's starting point for the project was the question: "What does it mean to be a British Muslim male today?" The first photographs were taken in Birmingham, where he would stop individuals in the street and start conversations as he took their portrait. He later expanded the project to London and Nottingham. The men depicted in his portraits identify as Muslim, and expressed they felt ridiculed by the negative media representation of their lives. The title of the exhibition is a phrase that Mahtab repeatedly heard in his conversations with the young men. "You get me?" is a street expression that can sometimes be used in an

aggressive way, but one that Mahtab says also "expresses vulnerability and uncertainty: Do you understand me? Do you know where I'm coming from?" Presented with quotes in the voices of the men themselves, each of the 24 large-scale portraits in the exhibition tells a story of boyhood and manhood, and shows how the men and boys negotiate masculinity, self-esteem, social identity and religion in multi-cultural Britain. Mahtab, 36, said: "These young men face unemployment, discrimination, and racism. Yet, they identify with Britain and have a strong sense of Britishness. "I didn't want to make portraits that made you feel sorry for these young men. I wanted to show that despite the pressures, these men have still found a way to hold themselves up as proud and dignified people, albeit with complex and often conflicting identities." He said he met his subjects by visiting areas of Birmingham where he knew young Asian men would hang out, including Shisha lounges and parks. He said: "I was working in London and on weekends would go back to Birmingham and cycle the streets. I'd stop people I didn't know and asked them if they wanted to be



Mahtab Hussain



involved in the project. Some were up for it, some rejected me outright. Some asked if I was working for the Government. "It was an instant exchange, and they were very honest interviews. It was all about identity, how these young men hold themselves and the pressures when your identity as a Muslim has been hijacked by different groups and the media. "I told them 'this is your opportunity to say something of value. How do you want the wider community to see you?' I told them they would have the opportunity to be shown in galleries and museums across the country." He said the photographs were shot in a similar 3/4 length style as many paintings in the National Portrait Gallery. Mahtab hopes his photographs create a conversation, adding: "It is really important that people talk about what they are seeing. Some people might have a bias against these people that they have never met before. Where does that bias come from?" He said that although the exhibition is about Asian men, it says just as much about working class boys as it does about Asian identity.

He said: "This is talking about class. When you look at how the subjects are dressed it is not a style specific to one particular ethnic community. A lot are dressed in similar styles to working class black communities or the Hispanic communities of America. "You see they are becoming part of a global identity, it is not just British. "There is that question asked of the Muslim community 'why aren't you integrating?' The answer is that a lot of young Muslim men are integrating to the Western culture, just maybe not in the way you want them to. "In this country they are told they are not British enough, but if they look to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, then that isn't their country either. It can be a massive struggle when it comes to finding your identity. I can see why some of these people are so frustrated, they are struggling to find who they are. "It was a conversation people had when the first migrant communities arrived, and it is a conversation we are still stuck in unfortunately. I'd really hoped we would have moved on but sadly that has not happened. I hope this exhibition helps humanise things for people.

"The idea of masculinity has also been massively re-defined in recent years, and that is reflected here too. The idea of an alpha male is disappearing too." He said many people from minority communities saw galleries as "white" places, but hopes more of Bradford's Asian community are introduced to the Impressions Gallery through this exhibition. He added: "It is hugely important that this work has been brought to Bradford. This exhibition is for everyone, it isn't just for the Asian community, although I do want Bradford's Asian community to engage with this, I think they'll have a lot to say with regards to identity. It will be good to have more brown faces being positioned as fine art. "I hope it inspires new generations to experience more ownership of these types of spaces. Impressions is a great space for this exhibition. It has a good Asian audience, I think 30 per cent of the people who visit are of an Asian background." The exhibition is by Autograph ABP and funded by the Arts Council. It has been curated by Dr Mark Sealy. It runs at Impressions Gallery until March 24.