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Solo Exhibition

Hasan & Husain Essop

Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde

Street 8, Alserkal Avenue, Unit 17 Al Quoz 1, Dubai, United Arab Emirates

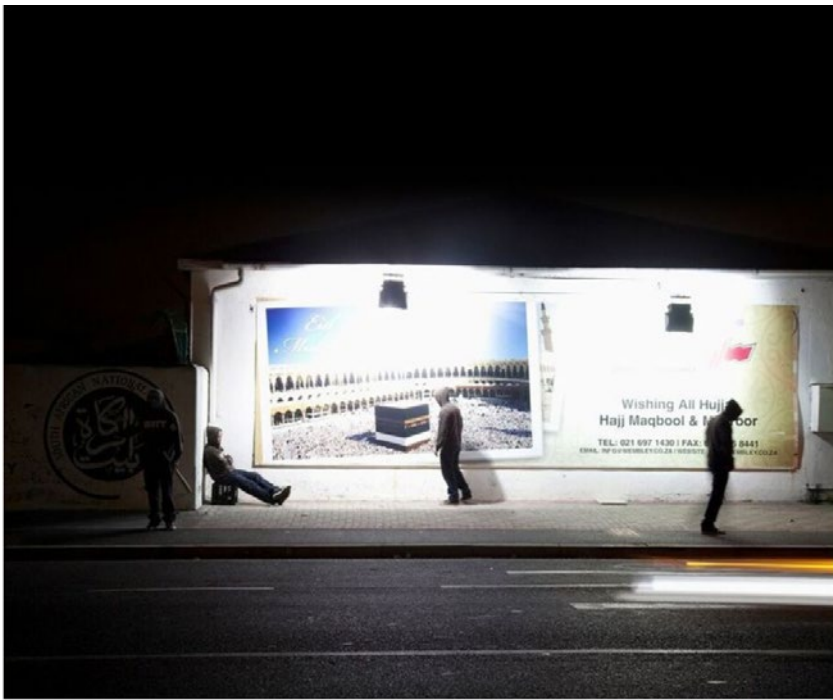
November 16, 2015 - January 7, 2016

With Collaboration and Performance Twin Photographers Represent South Africa's Muslim Community by Danna Lorch

Twin brothers Hasan and Husain Essop have a completely collaborative photographic practice in which the two (after a lot of planning, arguing, and negotiating) reach consensus on every shot. Because of the danger of many of the locations they shoot at as well as the consensus-building character of their collaboration, the Essops' practice is based entirely on in-depth preparation and leaves no room for spontaneous street shots or on-site experimentation. *Unrest*, their second solo show at [Gallery Isabelle van den Eynde](#) in Dubai, presents a series of performance-based photography, the culmination of a prestigious 2014 [Standard Bank Young Artist Award for Visual Art](#) from their native South Africa.

The brothers live in the Cape Flats, a low-income, gang-ruled section of Cape Town that lies in the shadow of Table Mountain—which might as well be around the world from the French Riviera-like beaches in affluent Camps Bay and Clifton, neighborhoods which sit just 30 minutes away and showcase some of the most valuable properties on the African continent.

In the observant, somewhat secretive minority Muslim community in which the brothers were raised, art that portrays the body is considered offensive, and as a result, the Essops have challenged themselves to maintain those values, while at the same time producing photography that doesn't shy away from portraying perspectives on South African life that are rarely shown to the outside world. As a result, they have chosen to only include images of themselves in their work, and unless one looks carefully it is hard to recognize that many of their shots are actually multiple performance portraits that have been formed into one composition. The images in *Unrest* use performance to tackle some of the country and the community's greatest social issues—from xenophobia to the perceived divide between Islam and modernity—through the lens of tongue-in-cheek pop cultural references. The brothers assume the identities of the characters that inhabit their work, whom are always male but run the gamut from gang members to mock jihadists as well as the religiously observant.



Hasan and Husain Essop, *Night Patrol*, 2014, Diasec-mounted lightjet C- print on archival paper, 115 x 138 cm

In *Freedom Fighters*, the brothers pose as jihadists, in a parody of a training camp that is in fact set on a playground along the Sea Point, an affluent and insulated suburb of Cape Town. This notion of Islam as radicalized, foreign, and dangerous, is further exploited in *Silat Mulut*, in which figures dressed as ninjas practice kicks and punches inside a mosque, referencing a suppressed movement in which members of the South African Muslim community took crime prevention into their own hands.

The technique is so seamless and the artists' embodiment of various personas so complete, that it's almost impossible to recognize that the various male figures are in fact different versions of the brothers all spliced into a single composition. In the past the twins have been criticized for technical inadequacy—certainly the result of lack of economic access to high-end equipment rather than a deficiency in know-how—but this recent body of work lays such criticisms to rest.

The Essops gave a talk on the evening of the opening at the A4 Space on [Alserkal Avenue](#), where an audience made up of UAE artists and creatives listened with rapt attention to their anecdotes about life in the Cape Flats and their associated photographic practice. It was unclear how an often stubbornly apathetic Dubai crowd and an Arab Muslim audience connected with these vignettes of African Islam as well as the blunt representation of daily violence that pervades the Essops' lives and consequently seeps into their practice. Although most viewers take the images at face value as pop culture postcards admiring the Karate Kid-like ninjas zinging through a mosque, it was apparent from the questions addressed by the audience that some would invest the time to dig below the surface and consider the underlying social messages which are practically scrawled in invisible ink within the works' pixels. The show was a risk for the gallery, and it is encouraging to find work that tackles tough questions in such a clever way being shown on Alserkal Avenue.

Another major theme in the show is the question of emasculation of young men in townships as a result of rampant racial division, unemployment, and addiction—something the Essops, as full time teachers, are acutely aware of. Rather than looking up to superheroes, kids are imagining themselves as gangsters, and this crime-ridden culture is what their image 786, depicting young men in front of Bismillah Cash N' Carry, illustrates. While several videos and an installation (that came across as daring but perhaps a little too experimental) are also included in the show, the meat of the exhibition lies in the photography. It will be interesting to see if the Essops push themselves to further explore other mediums and cultural contexts moving forward or stick to the performance-based photography model that they have so adeptly crafted and established.



Hasan and Husain Essop, *Freedom Fighters*, 2014, Diasec-mounted lightjet C- print on archival paper, 115 x 145 cm



Hasan and Husain Essop, *786*, 2014, Diasec-mounted lightjet C- print on archival paper, 115 x 193 cm