

Art as Conversation Starter An Interview with the South African Photo Artists Hasan and Husain Essop

Collaboration wasn't originally part of [Hasan and Husain Essop's](#) masterplan. When the twin brothers, both observant Muslims, enrolled in the [Michaelis School of Fine Art](#) in central Cape Town, Hasan focused on printmaking while Husain, the younger of the two, pursued photography. It was also Hasan who first experimented with staged portraiture. But the Islamic faith prohibits the depiction of human figures, which prompted him to ask a classmate to photograph him in various staged poses; he used these portraits as raw material for his collages. The [Goodman Gallery](#), which represents [William Kentridge](#), one of South Africa's most important artists, was impressed by the work and contacted Hasan. His response was to propose working with Husain on five digitally enhanced collaborative photos describing aspects of suburban life in Muslim Cape Town, including the key role Islamic faith plays in the lives of these two artists.

The brothers' decision to collaborate has paid rich dividends. In a country where black and white race politics tend to dominate social discourse, the Essops' work broadens the debate around identity. They are eloquent champions of South Africa's overlooked Islamic traditions, which arrived in the country across the Indian Ocean. Winners in 2014 of the [Standard Bank Young Artist Award](#), a prestigious early-career prize previously won by Kentridge, the Essops have also seen their work consistently selected for exhibition internationally. Their photographs have appeared on the 2009 [Havana Biennale](#), 2010 [Dak'Art Biennale](#) in Senegal, and 2011 [Rencontres Bamako](#) in Mali.

Notwithstanding their art activities, both Hasan and Husain are high-school teachers, not an unorthodox situation for artists in South Africa where support for challenging work is minimal. They are both married and have young children. This interview was conducted at Husain's family home in Penlyn Estate, a middle-class neighbourhood with a large concentration of Indian Muslims.

Sean O'Toole: *What is it about Cape Town that keeps you making photos here?*

Husain Essop: We are inspired by what happens around us here in Penlyn Estate. It is definitely unique and quite isolated too. Not a lot of people venture to this part of the city, nor do residents here venture out much. We spent our first 12 years in Rylands, which is the next suburb, and then we moved here. We attended school a few blocks away. It was only in high school that we saw white youths our age for the first time, and it was only when we went to art school that we really interacted with different cultures.

Our faith was also very much local: Mountview Mosque is less than 3km away.

Hasan Essop: There are also Islamic traditions that don't happen anywhere else in the world, like some of the rituals they perform in the [kramats](#) [sacred Islamic burial places] across the city. The Prophet Muhammad's birthday is also celebrated in a very particular way. At one mosque in the city they follow an Islamic tradition of Malay origin known as "[rampies sny](#)". Women cut citrus leaves, which they mix with various oils and rose water, place into a small paper pouch and offer as gifts to men.

How has the turbulence in the Middle East impacted you as Muslims watching from far away?

Husain Essop: Last year we exhibited at Gallery [Isabelle van den Eynde](#) in Dubai. As part of the exhibition we gave a talk where we spoke about some of the issues affecting us here in Cape Town, the drug abuse, gang violence and everyday safety worries. Our audience very much related. It reminded me that even though our work is quite personal in its origin people can relate to it because what we are showing is an experience that is, if I can use the word, universal.

Hasan Essop: There is a certain tone to the news and I know it impacts Husain a lot more than me. He gets angry and upset. As for me, I focus on the beauty of Islam, which is also what I want our work to show. This is where the push and pull of our creative relationship exists.

Negative stereotypes, especially about young Muslim men, are ubiquitous, particularly in Europe and the US. Both of you are young Muslim men. How do you react personally and with your art? Your work sometimes plays with these stereotypes.

Husain Essop: We are producing new work that confronts this question head-on. The series includes photographs of a burnt-out vehicle, drowned people on a beach and a scene resembling a beheading on a beach. All the scenarios are based on images from the media. It is not easy work and leads to intense debates between us.

Hasan Essop: I don't want our work to reinforce stereotypes. We can constantly say, 'That is not what Islam about', but at the end of the day there are people doing terrible things in the name of Islam. I want our work to show the beautiful side of Islam, not what you see in the media. But I agree with Husain that we are documenting a period in history that has many ugly things, but my argument is that we have to find a balance.

Your 2014 exhibition Unrest included a satirical photo of you dressed in militia clothing

exercising in a public park. It jokingly made fun of the false stereotypes as young Muslim men as jihadists. Your new work in progress series doesn't include humour. Why?

Husain Essop: What is happening in Syria is very serious. So many people have died in the last two years. It is not a time for jokes.

The Syrian "refugee crisis" is currently one of the most pressing problems in Europe. Many Europeans are afraid of an invasion of the continent by migrants from Africa or the Arab countries. You yourselves come from an immigrant family. What is your opinion on the current situation?

Hasan Essop: I think Germany has done an amazing job. While Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq have absorbed many refugees, it is disappointing that the UAE and Saudi Arabia haven't. They should have been the first countries to open their borders to the Syrians.

Husain Essop: To answer your question, immigrants are not a problem. They want to work. Look at the Turks in Germany ...

Hasan Essop: ... they are the country's workforce.

Husain Essop: This idea of an "invasion" is created by the media, which has played a massive part in creating hatred of Muslims. A lot of horror has been happening all over the world but only a few things are isolated and shown on the news. Large numbers of people are dying from starvation and drought, but this doesn't generate the same media attention as the Paris attacks, for example.

We first met in 2007 when Al-Qaeda dominated the news. The attention has since shifted to groups like ISIS or Boko Haram. One thing remains consistent: Muslim culture is under the spotlight. Have you noticed changes in attitudes to your work over the past decade?

Husain Essop: If I think back to Dubai last year, the issue we talked about most was not defacing the religion. Muslim collectors asked us detailed questions. They found our work [Silat Mulut](#) (2014), where we present ourselves dressed in black doing karate in a mosque, to be very controversial. One collector told us about the hateful messages he received after posting the image on Instagram. No one really understood what we were trying to say – our aim is to portray the contradictory nature of reality. It took a lot of explanation to convey this.

You want your work to be a conversation starter, right? People look, there is a reaction, and a dialogue follows.

Hasan Essop: That is the hope. But at the same time you want people to buy your work. There is no market for our provocative images. Yes people enjoy having the conversation about what they mean and say, but at the same time no one wants to buy the images. It is a dilemma. You can make art to start that conversation, but you also have to sustain yourself and provide for your family. How do we find that balance? We are both full-time teachers, which is fortunate; we are not pressured to make pretty pictures only. By the way, I like that you call our work a "conversation starter". In 2009 we were invited to participate in a workshop coordinated by the University of Hamburg. It dealt with cultural identity, with immigrants coming to Germany and making a life. It looked at their struggles.

Husain Essop: We were invited as outsiders to come and deal with these issues. Our work was an "icebreaker" for people to connect and engage issues, including Germans. That was really interesting. What I have been talking to Hasan about since – and this relates to what we were speaking about earlier – is the importance of capturing history in our photographs. It is really important. Maybe it won't have value now, but as time progresses and people look back the work will grow in power.

I want to pause on that phrase "capturing history". You are not documentarians.

Husain Essop: No, we stage performances that speak about our lives and what we see going on around us.

Hasan Essop: There is also spontaneity involved, coming across a space and deciding to interact with it somehow through photography.

Let speak about your works in the Deutsche Bank Collection. "Cape Town, South Africa (Variation)" shows two men, backs turned to the camera, packed bags next to them, looking over the sea towards an uncertain future. It dates from 2009, but looking at it today it seems like a visual metaphor for the current "refugee crises." What was your idea behind this work?

Hasan Essop: It was photographed in Kalk Bay, a small fishing harbour in False Bay, on the Indian Ocean side of Cape Town.

Husain Essop: We produced it as a response to the 2008 xenophobic attacks in South

Africa. We tried to show how black African migrants to South Africa hastily packed all their possessions into a single bag and fled to churches and mosques, searching for safety. But look how it applies now to the refugee crisis! This goes back to my conversation with Hasan about the need to document history.

Hasan Essop: The work was criticised for being oblique. Its relationship to the news events that framed it wasn't obvious. But if you look at the fabric of the two men, they are wearing a [kurta](#) [collar-less shirt] made with African fabric. It is probably more obvious to a Muslim viewer that they are foreigners. We made the work shortly before going to Cuba to attend a residency and show on the Havana Biennale. For me it was also a work about going on this journey; we were standing on the edge of the world and looking over the seas.

Can you speak more about "Fast Twins" (2009), which was photographed in Cuba?

Husain Essop: We shot that in Havana. The graffiti reminded us of Cape Town, especially the neighbourhoods where we grew up. As young boys, if you wanted a place to relax you'd hang out in front of a graffiti wall.

Hasan Essop: It also has a date and place name in the photo that precisely locates it.

You have also exhibited in Senegal where you photographed "Slave Lodge II" (2010). What is the context of this photo?

Husain Essop: It was shot on [Gorée Island](#), a former slave port off the coast of Dakar. The photo shows the walkway used by slaves when they were loaded onto ships bound for the US. It was intense. You can't believe how animalistic it was. They were housed in windowless rooms with only a hole in the roof.

Hasan Essop: Gorée Island has an old mosque, which we also photographed. There is a mural that celebrates three imams who spread Islam in the country. We spontaneously decided to stage a photograph where we put on these brightly coloured Senegalese kurtas. We ended up spending the whole day on the island.

Husain Essop: I loved Dakar. We encountered a colourful Islam ...

Hasan Essop: ... an African Islam that was unique for us.

You don't only make photos. For instance, for Unrest you presented sculpture and video. Is it something you will explore further?

Husain Essop: Definitely. We sold two videos at [Frieze London](#), which was a surprise, both of them based on Shia rituals. [Chest Beating](#) (2014) shows a continuous chest-beating ritual known as "[Mourning of Muharram](#)". Our heads were cropped out. It is tied into this idea of violence and how to deal with it in your own life.

Hasan Essop: Sculpture is a little trickier; you have to be careful in portrayals of the figure to avoid idolatry. That was why we originally worked with photography: it offered us a way around these issues with, and proscriptions surrounding the human form.

When we first met in 2007 you spoke of your frustrations at always being told at art school to look at the work of Iranian artist Shirin Neshat. A decade later and lots of traveling behind you, which artists do you respond to?

Hasan Essop: I love the Paris-based Moroccan artist [Mounir Fatmi](#). I think his work is unbelievable. I also like the work of Cameroonian artist [Barthélémy Toguo](#).

Husain Essop: He is so cool and super intelligent.

Hasan Essop: Sculptor [Jane Alexander](#), who was one of our lecturers, is also an inspiration.

Husain Essop: When I feel down and need inspiration I type "William Kentridge" into Google Images, and I am inspired. Kentridge inspires me, his charcoal drawings, his sculptures using optical illusions. There is so much beauty.

Hasan Essop: I love that art is everything to him. To me that is what art is: it is everything.