

Tell the World Who You Are

Lesley A. Martin

Mohamud Mumin is a Somali-born photographer; a self-identified Minnesotan. His work is committed to presenting the portraits and words of young Somali men and women who have come to consider the United States home, yet remain committed and proud of their East African heritage. His first project, *The Youth//Dhallinyarada*, presents interviews with thirteen Somali men. In a multi-media video piece, the interviews speak to the schizophrenic pull of one's own culture with that of one's adopted home. The video is accompanied by a series of photographs: large-format black-and-white portraits. Each image brings the viewer into direct rapport with the various men, focusing on their direct return of the viewer's gaze. The ring light used as lighting source by Mumin, which helps render each image crisply with ample detail and surface texture, illuminates the iris of each subject's eyes, and was hand-made by the photographer. The design of this lighting equipment was carefully crafted for the project at hand, including the use of thirteen bulbs comprising the circular perimeter of the light, echoing the number of individuals depicted. The number thirteen is linked to the thirteen founding members of the *Somali Youth Club*, a prototype for one of Somalia's first modern political parties integral to fighting for Somalia's independence in the 1950s and 60s. This detail is telling of the conscientiousness and thoroughness of Mumin's practice—the care he has taken to steep his work not only in his own experiences and that of his community, but within a richly researched historical and sociological backdrop as well.

In the aforementioned series, *The Youth//Dhallinyarada*, one of the subjects, Abdirizaq Ahmed, who is identified as an "Athlete and Mentor," gives the following advice: "Number one, be part of your community. Number two, get your word out, tell the world who you are." The Somali community in Minnesota, now the largest in the United States, is a topic of frequent discussion with both staunch allies and its detractors. What is frequently missing from this conversation in the mainstream media, however, is the voice of the community itself.

Edward Said, among other cultural critics, gave us an astute assessment of the relationship of culture to power, and of the way that cultural narratives, as a form of representation, can be manipulated and edited by political forces in power. The idea that by taking control of one's own story, one's own image, the individual is able to have more control over their lives, has become an assumption, not just a theory, within contemporary cultural politics. The subsequent re-examination and reclamation of self-representation within international immigrant communities has become ingrained in both art-making and documentary practices. Mohamud Mumin's work operates as a very good example of this.

He is essentially self-taught as a photographer (he holds an undergraduate degree in chemistry from University of Minnesota). He has voraciously sought out mentors in the field, including writings and other projects by artists, filmmakers, and philosophers that deal with the different ways immigrant communities have shaped their identities abroad; the ways in which cultural memory is retained and transmitted. Mumin has informed his work not only via his personal experience, but also by seeking out the larger

international context for his project. (In the wide-ranging list of resources offered to me by the photographer as a way of orienting my thinking about his practice, he lists *Memoires d'Immigres* [*Immigrants' Memories*], the award-winning documentary by Algerian-French filmmaker Yamina Benguigui, a film intended to break "the immigrant's silence and shame"—while also including a paper from a professor at the University of Rhode Island that assembles an analysis and critique of Benguigui's approach; highlighting films by five women documentary filmmakers that have followed *Memoires d'Immigres*. The paper suggests a possible reaction to that film, and to the pitfalls of constructing an overly universalized view of migrant communities that might simply replace one set of stereotypes for another.)

The strongest of photographic projects are driven not just from a set of community obligations. They come from a highly personal set of questions that the artist feels can best be responded to and explored via the visual image; the collection and assessment of data visual and otherwise. In his newest series, published as *Xusuus Sahmis//Scouting Memory* and created as part of a recent McKnight Fellowship, Mumin expands his project to focus on portraits of women in the Minnesotan-Somali community. To date, he has photographed six young women in the same manner as the men depicted in *The Youth//Dhallinyarada*. As an accompaniment to his own black-and-white formal portraits of these women, Mumin has also engaged the women as co-authors, asking them to document their interior domestic spaces with their camera phones. These images are gathered, edited, and presented alongside his own portraits, and will be incorporated into a multi-media piece that will also include interviews with the subjects, as with his prior series. The questions posed with this work focus similarly on the struggle to reconcile home and heritage, but with a particular focus on the way in which mothers and daughters are engaged with passing along traditions via the day-to-day activities of home-making, cooking, dress, and décor. How does one retain the characteristics and traditions of home while simultaneously being conscious of one's new surroundings? It also begs the question: how does one allow for an individualized response to one's new environment—how much does one take from what has come before; how much does one forge on one's own?

Mumin's project is just at a start; the building blocks are being brought into place—not just the assembly of subject matter but also of strategies, methodologies, and reference points. One has the sense though, that given his drive and willingness to remain open to the lessons of both past and present, that the answers he finds (or the further questions he finds to ask) will be of interest not just to his personal community; but also of use and interest to the national community and the ever-evolving and increasingly relevant conversation of immigration in the United States.

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