HOGARTH: LONDON LIVES, LONDON VOICES - IN PICTURES

ARTS

Hogarth at Pitzhanger: Artist Faisal Abdu'Allah on cutting hair at new exhibition about life in London

Ceci n'est pas un haircut. On the one hand, Faisal Abdu'Allah's Live Salon is one of the best trims in town (also, free), and familiar territory: the barber's chair, the unfurling of the cape, the snicker-snack of scissors.

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Yet in place of a reliable mirror to keep an eye on my hairline's progress there's a small, well-meaning but nonetheless noticeable audience; a heaving barbershop has given way to Sir John Soane's Grade I-listed Pitzhanger Manor and Gallery in Ealing; the usual accumulation of black and white headshots of Hollywood A-to-Z-listers is replaced by William Hogarth's 18th-century masterpiece A Rake's Progress, which, although aesthetically more interesting, is decidedly sparser on lid #inspo.

The group exhibition, Hogarth: London Voices, London Lives, supports Pitzhanger's reunion with Hogarth's satirical series, which was owned by Soane and hung at the manor during his lifetime and now returns to the building for the first time in more than 200 years. It depicts the social conditions of London in 1732, a feat the exhibition sets out to match for 2020. Ruth Ewen's gorgeous woodblock posters are an excellent tribute to Hogarth's satirical eye, while archive footage of Southbank skateboarders speaks more to the city's contemporary effervescence.

But Abdu'Allah's work is the main (mane?) event — an actual haircut in an actual barber's chair. An associate professor of Art and Faculty Director of UW-Madison's Creative Arts Community, Royal College of Arts alumnus, and — reassuringly — accomplished barber with more than 30 years of experience, Abdu'Allah, 50, has flown in from Wisconsin, where he teaches, hours before he and I meet.

"But I can do this with my eyes closed," he says, weaving his buzzer effortlessly through a few loose ginger strands. Please don't do it with your eyes closed, I say. He won't host every Live Salon during the exhibition's run, but he will host this one. Is is it art? Who is the viewer, and who is the subject? "To me, it's just sculpture, but live sculpture," he says, which makes me feel a little like human topiary. A 'before' polaroid is snapped: everyone who takes part will have theirs displayed during the exhibition, alongside Abdu'Allah's's striking tintype photographs of his tools (scissors, razor heads, combs).

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Even more so than most barbers I've met, Abdu'Allah is a man gifted with great charisma, which is useful in many contexts, but especially this one. "We're all performing our identities in a way," he says. "I think in some ways our life is a constant performance: we dress ourselves in the morning, or co-ordinate ourselves in a particular way to present a particular idea of who we want to be to people."

Changing times: The Rake's Progress VI – The Gaming House, William Hogarth

He says he struggled presenting himself one way at the RCA — all discussions of Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, as "the only guy who looked like me in my academic year" — and another in the Saturday job he took at a barber's in Willesden to support himself. "I was code-

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switching between those two worlds," he says, "But I decided: I'm going to use this barber shop space where I'm seeing great current issues and themes playing out, every day, and I'm going to record it, as an index of these times, in my work, so it can stay around in perpetuity." Which, in many ways, is exactly what Hogarth was trying to do.

Abdu'Allah, whose father was a pastor, sees the chair as a "portal", and the act as a "laying on of hands". There is an ecclesiastical element to the 45 minutes we spend together: I feel calmer, fussed over, and at times it's like a confession is being teased from me. It is also a service, of course: before, I have a scraggly neck beard and an unkempt shortcrop — afterwards I am well groomed. "A haircut is social commentary," Abdu'Allah says,. "It can mark a promotion, a holiday, a depression." He loves that it isn't permanent. "I think permanence makes people complacent, it means there's no room for change. I love that things can always be changed, things can always be moved. We can transform in a matter of minutes."

Art must constantly rewrite itself, he points out. As a 15-year-old wandering around the National Portrait Gallery, he recalls looking for likenesses to himself in the work. "It was, where can I see myself? Oh there I am. I'm a servant," he says. "Where can I see myself again? Oh, I'm in chains." In this work, he is master craftsman, auteur and sculptor. I leave with an excellent haircut, and a lot to think about. I'm a real piece of work.

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