

Sonia Boué and Ashokkumar D Mistry

Las Gemelas: Arrival (a lexicon of unmaking)

John Hansard Gallery
5 October 2024 to
11 January 2025

#JHGLasGemelas

John Hansard Gallery
is pleased to present
*Las Gemelas: Arrival (a lexicon
of unmaking)*, an exhibition
by Sonia Boué and
Ashokkumar D Mistry.

On 23rd May 1937, the SS Habana docked in Southampton with almost 4,000 Basque child refugees on board. The Special Collections at the University of Southampton now holds archives relating to this event, the biggest single influx of refugees in British history. The British government pursued a policy of 'neutrality' regarding the Spanish Civil War, but as the children took flight from the aerial bombardments of fascist forces in Spain the people of Southampton improvised their shelter. The children were subsequently billeted in colonies throughout the UK until it was deemed safe to return, though this was uncertain. Over two hundred Basque children settled permanently and lived out their adult lives on these shores. The archives represent material memory and can be experienced as a family collection – a deeply personal account of history, while also being a communal record.

Las Gemelas (The Twins), the creative duo Sonia Boué and Ashokkumar D Mistry, have different relations to these archives: Boué's father was himself a political exile from the Spanish Civil War, while Mistry's family fled the tumult of the waning days of Empire. Sharing a heritage of forced migration, their collaboration has produced a series of contrasting parallel responses. Mistry unpicks preconceptions of history and storytelling with a multi-sensory promenade of experiences, while Boué seeks to mediate the exile experience by enacting a vigil of making. Counterpoints and springboards emerge where competing versions of truth and history coexist through the enrichment of their twinning. Concerned with human and historical dislocations, the duo present their lexicon of unmaking. The customary formality of an archive is upended to present audiences with living memory sites, on the one hand imbued with playful energy and on the other celebrating generosity and the labours of care.

Tent-like fabric structures hang from above, welcoming visitors and reimagining the refugees' arrival. For Mistry, these suspended constructions act as both a symbol of motherly care, and a safe sensory space to withdraw into. Boué evokes a sustained act of love with a sculptural installation of one hundred colourful wool pom-poms inspired by the fringe on a Spanish souvenir tambourine. For Boué pom-poms provide an all-encompassing motif, including handcrafts, linked to the

progressive pedagogy of the second Spanish republic and a rumoured Spanish 'pom-pom' anti-aircraft gun. Their making offered Boué an extended experience of sensory joy through this intensely meditative and recursive activity.

Mistry has summoned a collection of wooden tables – crowd-sourced from the local area – and 'sewn together' in a performance by Southampton communities, bringing to life the call to action of ordinary locals' donations of furniture and clothing that was once collected for the Basque children in 1937. The exhibition further features photographs donated to the archive from Boué's own personal collection, depicting her father leading a group of Basque children through exercise routines. They sit alongside black and white images of Basque children taken from postcards that have been colourised by Mistry to remind us that they lived their lives in full colour.

Las Gemelas: Arrival (a lexicon of unmaking) offers a neurodivergent approach to exhibition making. In their radically different responses to archival materials, new notions of caregiving are expressed: on one hand, the trauma of exile is recognised by a tender act of memory-care work; on the other, a flamboyant unmaking of expectations of historical photographs into a kaleidoscope of pattern, textile and community.

The pom-pom wool has been generously sponsored by the Keighley based West Yorkshire Spinners company, to commemorate the one hundred Basque children cared for at a colony in Keighley.

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Notes for Editors

Las Gemelas

Las Gemelas is an artistic collaboration between neurodivergent artists Sonia Boué and Ashokkumar D Mistry. Together they create art through conversation and valuing each other's individual approaches. Mistry and Boué's process is steeped in accessibility and challenges the art world to newly appreciate differences.

Las Gemelas use twinning to make artworks from two different perspectives, interpretations of realities and lived experiences. They invite the viewer to understand multiple versions of human stories beyond mainstream narratives. What emerges from their process are vivid expressions of introverted reflection and flamboyant extroversion.

Sonia Boué

Sonia Boué is an Oxford-based Anglo-Spanish neurodivergent artist. As a child, Boué's family lived in political exile in England as a result of the Spanish Civil War. Her work is often an attempt to bridge a profound sense of displacement; feeling herself exiled both geographically and neurologically speaking. Through her practice she is able to locate a sense of self within wider histories and cultural contexts.

Boué has emerged through a series of neuro-inclusive projects, culminating in the publication of *Neurophototherapy: Playfully Unmasking with Photography and Collage* (2023). Recent commissions include Middlesbrough Institute of Modern Art (MIMA) and *We Are Invisible We Are Visible*, Site Gallery (DASH, Ampersand Foundation Award, 2021). Boué's response, *The Artist is Not Present* (2022) critiques the neurotypical gaze in Marina Abramović's work. Earlier projects include working with BBC Radio 4 (2018) and Tate Britain (2015). Boué is concerned with objects and identity transition, rooted in a fascination with family archives, material memory and inherited trauma.

Ashokkumar D Mistry

Ashokkumar D Mistry is a Leicester-based, neurodivergent multidisciplinary artist and writer. Mistry's antifascist-centered research scrutinizes individual difference to expand understanding to include impairment and disability as integral to the human condition. His work encourages close interaction and provokes debate. Mistry unsettles the mythology of national identity and reveals the ways in which symbols and images are encoded and naturalized. Archival images are embellished, remixed, edited and decontextualized to interrogate their latent ideologies.

Recent work includes: delivering the *Edward Rushton Social Justice Lecture* at DaDaFest (2023); *Don't Stare*, Project Artworks Explorers Project, Tate Liverpool and IKON Gallery, Birmingham (2023); *Beyond Relentless Acceleration*, Nottingham Contemporary and *We Are Invisible We Are Visible*, Site Gallery (DASH, Ampersand Foundation Award, 2021). Mistry is co-founder of the *Disability in British Art* (DIBA) research group within the British Art Network; an associate of DASH Arts' Future Curators Programme; a founder member of disabled artists collectives, *ONYX Collective and Comrades*; has been an Associate Artist and writer for Disability Arts Online; a Fellow of the International Association Of Art Critics (AICA-UK). Mistry has written extensively for British Art Network, Shape Arts and Unlimited.

John Hansard Gallery

John Hansard Gallery is a locally engaged and internationally recognised contemporary art gallery in Southampton. Being part of the University of Southampton, the Gallery aims to create extraordinary encounters with the rich diversity of contemporary art that inspire people and communities to change the world for the better. To realise this, the Gallery creates innovative and critically acclaimed contemporary art exhibitions, events, engagement and research projects that excite, challenge, represent and reach the widest possible public audience. Learning and engagement are at the heart of the Gallery and underpin all its activities. The innovative education and public programme is accompanied by special community-focused projects, including activities for all ages and levels of experience. John Hansard Gallery was established in 1979 and is a National Portfolio Organisation supported by Arts Council England.
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