

Profile

Adam Farah

The London-born artist, aka free.yard, uses music and other communal cultural references to evoke the soundtrack of their childhood and neighbourhood while inviting viewers to conjure their own.

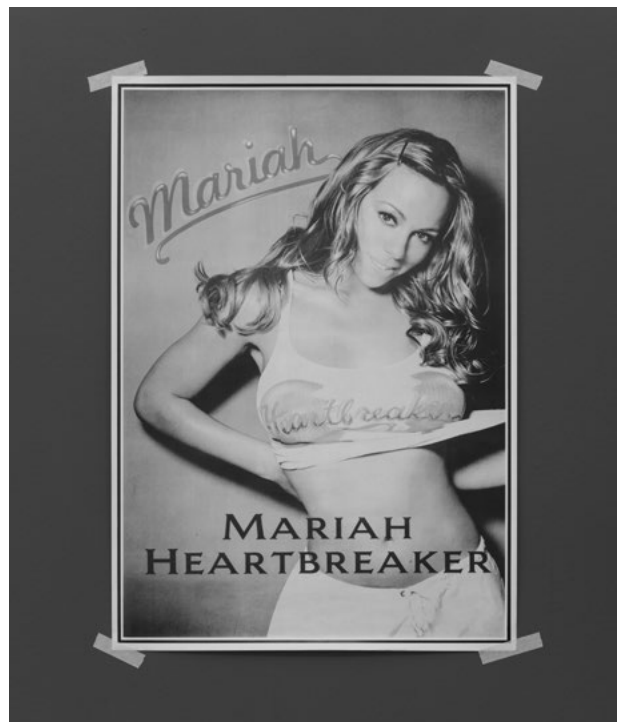
I first visited Adam Farah's current exhibition at Camden Art Centre with my oldest friend, Hannah. Both of us grew up in north London around the same time as Farah, who also goes under the name free.yard. On entering the gallery, Hannah said, 'What could be better than remaking and paying homage to Brent Cross's fountain?' And we talked about how the pseudonym of free.yard conjures up the central week-end activity of our teenage years - finding out who had a free yard and therefore where we could hang out. Other aspects of Farah's exhibition also tap into a set of cultural references overly familiar to me, and not in an art-world sense. On the 'locations', 'listening' and 'bus routes' list included at the back of the file notes produced for the exhibition, I spot the 144 and 43 routes, Cricklewood Broadway and the Sugababes debut album *One Touch*. The sign for Cecil Gee, a menswear shop visible above the fountain in the large photograph of Brent Cross, prompts visceral memories of spending hours in the shopping centre with my mum and grandma; in a trite, suburban, Proustian moment, I almost taste the chocolate eclairs served at the much-missed Lindy's cafe. Placed in front of the Brent Cross photograph is a CD listening tower, evoking hours spent hanging around Virgin Megastore on Oxford Street. Combined, the photograph and the tower form a work titled *My mum died too early to teach me about love and relationships, so I'm trying to learn something from the music I remember her listening to when I saw her crying - or at least connect to her spirit so we can share our heartache*. Despite all this, there is nothing in Farah's exhibition that can be described as merely nostalgic.

In front of this work is a weathered steel fountain, filled with KA sparkling black grape drink, which lies on top of a cream twist pile carpet covered in PVC. The fountain and carpet comprise a work entitled *TIM.L (The Endz Portorbital Alchemical Mix)*. Opposite is a varnished dado rail which lies beneath a strip of purple paint adorned with posters of Mariah Carey, and hanging between these are flickable shop-display plastic folders filled with Farah's work, including photographs of a bottle of poppers emblazoned with the word 'English' and a Union Jack placed in a saucer of incense, as well as an illuminated, steamy window on the top deck of a London bus. This work is titled *Anymore Pics?*, suggesting the somewhat impoverished ocularcentrism of hook-up/dating app chat when set in relation to the range of sensory experiences conjured in these images: sound is evoked via handwritten song lyrics; scent and physical dilation via incense and poppers; hallucination through the image of a pile of psilocybin resting on Farah's palm; moisture via the condensation on the bus window; tinkering or, more respectfully, engineering (as in the way of the Dub producer) is conveyed in Farah's photographs of retooled, now obsolete technology.

The dado rail is titled *My poor trapped immigrant parent whose crushed dreams turned into my trauma*



My mum died too early to teach me about love and relationships, so I'm trying to learn something from the music I remember her listening to when I saw her crying - or at least connect to her spirit so we can share our heartache, 2021



Heartbreaker, 2021



'What I've Learned from You and Myself (Peak Momentations / Inside My Velvet Rope Mix)', installation view

(*The Sidewardly Mobile Mix*). And while the Brent Cross fountain and dado rail evoke mobility and yearning, qualities which the titles emphasise, the reclaimed school changing room benches, which provide seating to watch the video *LoW ViBrAtionAL (The Microdose Birthday Mix)*, are called *Sorry Mate (Triggered & Chill)*, summoning up the sweaty, stressful feeling of undressing as a teenager. Rather than the ubiquitous Lynx deodorant that continues to dominate changing rooms, the scent which fills the room at hourly intervals is a knock-off of Le Labo's 'Santal 33' purchased at Portobello Road market. Shuttling us from PE changing rooms to contemporary bourgeois tastes via the ubiquitous scent for metropolitan creatives of the past decade, the knock-off scent provides the kind of mediation which Farah relates to the idea of remixes and with processes of disidentification – a term drawn from queer theorist José Estaban Muñoz. Throughout their work, Farah thinks through the gaps and affinities between the world of high theory and the world of the 'ends' (London working-class slang for 'neighbourhood'), especially in terms of theory's claims to speak to or with the proletarian inhabitants of those neighbourhoods.

While Farah's approach to these questions has a sociological aspect, especially their more psycho-geographic tendencies, their method is never statistical, moralising or dry, but rather presents a transformative, magical approach to often domestic materials and popular culture. (This approach brings to mind Ima-Abasi Okon – Profile *AM428* – as does their shared penchant for a luxuriant, elaborate use of language in titles.) A good example of this quality can be found in Farah's short film *Untitled (A Momentation for Saul)*, 2019. Filmed on a mobile phone from the top deck of the 144, the video tracks the shops of Turnpike Lane to a soundtrack of En Vogue's 1997 a cappella masterpiece, 'Does Anybody Hear Me'. At a certain point the image shudders, which Farah explains as evoking the feeling of having your head pressed against the window of a bus. In a lecture at Central Saint Martins, Farah talked about this work and the effect of the vibration as creating an 'ends portal'. For Farah this portal doesn't describe an aspirational mobility but rather the capacity of cultures, such as those found in the housing estates that the artist grew up in, to create new worlds. Farah identifies this process as being rooted in practices of communality, community and making with bare minimum resources; a set of life-enhancing processes which 'exist amongst and with all kinds of tragedies', and which they summarise as 'ends theory'.

How to avoid a vitalised fetishisation of such communal practices within the rarefied world of theory, where theory once again fails to learn anything from the tragic side of the equation, is part of Farah's urgent work about ending the kind of property relations which necessitate and produce these bare minimums of life or ends theory. Some of Farah's images negotiate this problem along acerbic lines, such as the back of a bus seat that has been burned; the blackened blue plastic looks almost like one of Alberto Burri's *Combustioni plastica*. By remixing modernist innovation via mass transit destruction, Farah emphasises the inextricability of any meaningful artistic autonomy from the possibility of social change (the bus stands for the communal, the burned plastic stands for a kind of mythic artistic move). Yet the broader sensibility Farah proposes for negotiating the

contradictions between the 'ends' and 'theory' could perhaps be most fruitfully compared with recent writing by D Hunter, in his books *Chav Solidarity* and *Tracksuits, Traumas and Class Traitors*. In these biographical accounts of (lumpen) proletarian life in the UK over the past 20 years or so, Hunter offers up a comparably complex picture of class relations, love and communality as well as shame, sexuality, violence and trauma, always dwelling on the fraught dynamic between support and conflict that sociality amid immiseration brings.

Farah writes in an exhibition wall text that they are working with the process of 'shedding the skin of life' and that, if anything, the show might offer a means of thinking about 'mourning different people, relationships, moments in their own lives – what has that helped you to learn about yourself? If you could dedicate the title of the show to someone in your own life who would it be?' From a personal perspective, it is completely impossible for me not to reflect on my experience of a having a child earlier this year, of giving new life, and the ways in which pregnancy and birth are always proximate to death. It is also impossible to talk about these experiences – ones which Farah describes, rightly with scepticism, as 'universalising themes' – without lapsing into cliché and platitudinous statements. But Farah offers a way of negotiating nostalgia, sentiment and universality via the specificity of cultural experiences and objects as vessels for these emotions, and, in this respect, the work asks viewers to negotiate their own proximity or distance from particularities of class, race and history. Indeed, while I share a north-west London frame of reference with Farah, there are important differences: my Brent Cross is a middle-class Jewish one; my Cricklewood is tied to thinking about my dad's identification with his Irishness. This shares with Farah a disidentification from being English, while at the same time romantically embracing the particularities of London suburbs.

Looking at the photograph of Brent Cross, I wonder who Cecil Gee was, and discover he was a Lithuanian Jew called Sasha Goldstein who came to the UK in 1913 and ascended out of the schmutter factories of the East End to becoming a designer aligned with the burgeoning Mod fashions of the 1960s, looping me back round once more to questions of class, migration, community and mobility, whether it be upwards like Gee or, as Farah suggests, a sideways process that might mean life lived more communally, as in ends theory. In an essay exploring the place of RnB within Farah's practice alongside the writing of Anne Boyer, Dhanveer Singh Brar describes how their shared adoration for the genre becomes a means towards communality, via the singularity and intensity of attachment, explaining that 'the tighter they hold Mary J Blige and Sugababes to themselves, the more chance they have of meeting others like them out in the open'. Singh Brar concludes with this insight: 'RnB becomes the venue for a composition of living in public.' This is what free.yard offers us, as the name's implicit dismissal of property relations suggests.

Adam Farah's exhibition 'What I've Learned from You and Myself (Peak Momentations / Inside My Velvet Rope Mix)' continues at Camden Art Centre to 23 December.

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