

Visual Studies 2

A Diary of project progression

Caitlin Doyle

Found image



This found image captures something timeless about youth and how it stands out, even in the most composed or structured settings. The photograph itself is carefully framed, each subject formally lined up in front of an interesting backdrop; reeking of tradition. But right in the middle of all that formality is a child, slightly off-balance, leaning/fidgeting and wearing an expression that feels just a bit more alive than the adults around them. That tension, between the stillness of the grown-ups and the subtle restlessness of youth, is what makes the photo compelling. Even in black and white, even in a formal pose, the child radiates that sense of potential, of energy waiting to unfold. Youth can be quiet, it's tucked into a family photo, but it always pulls your eye. Photographically, the image does what so many photos try to do: it captures a fleeting moment in a stage of life that never stays still for long.

the child radiates that sense of potential, of not-quite-there-yet, of energy waiting to unfold

Contact sheet

This contact sheet marks the beginning of my visual exploration into youth, and already I can feel the complexity of that stage of life coming through. There's a quiet awkwardness in these images - an uncertainty in posture, a hesitance in gaze that feels incredibly honest and true to the experience of growing up. These aren't performative portraits; they're more about the in-between spaces, where identity hasn't fully landed yet. In particular, images like **IMG_5424** stand out as holding that tension, capturing a moment that's not quite a pose and not quite candid, but something liminal and real.

Ryan mentioned the strength of those in-between moments, and I understand what he means, the power lies in what's unresolved. The same goes for **IMG_5434** and **IMG_5438** there's a subtle resistance in them, a sense of the subject being present but also slightly unsure of the camera, of themselves and how they're seen. That tension is what makes these portraits feel alive. They speak to youth in a format of internal conversation and that's what I want to nurture as the project grows.

Discussion as research

In this project, I'm realising that portraiture isn't just about capturing a face or a figure, it's about the conversations we hold, whether they happen in words or in silence. My niece has become central to this work, not just as a subject, but as a quiet collaborator. The images I make of her are rooted in our relationship, and in the soft, unspoken dialogue we share. We don't need dramatic gestures or posed moments. Instead, I observe whilst she exists, and somewhere in between, we acknowledge where she is in her life: on the cusp of something, in the middle of growing up, in a space that feels dually fleeting and infinite.

These portraits are my way of listening. They are shaped by subtle exchanges: a glance, a relax in posture, the way she pauses before speaking. This process has become my research - an ongoing conversation about youth, identity, and time. It's deeply personal. I'm not trying to define what youth is universally; I'm trying to understand what it is for her, right now. This method feels true. It's slow, observational, and relational. It values presence over performance.





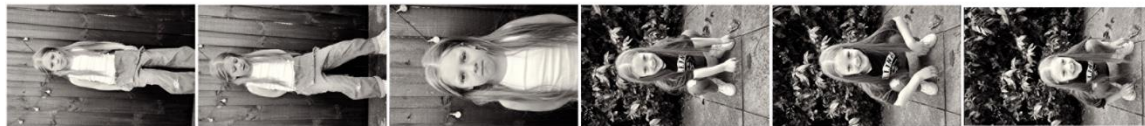
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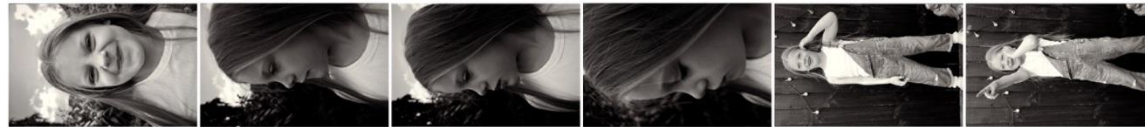
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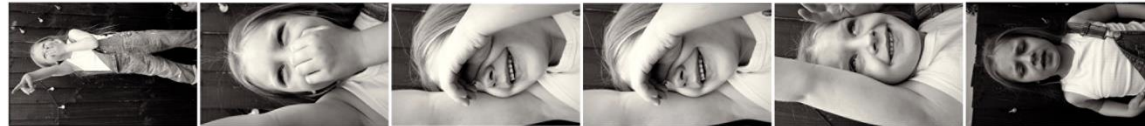
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Sally Mann, Immediate Family, 1992

Ryan recommended I look at Sally Mann's Immediate Family (1992), and it's been a powerful reference point as I reflect on the early stages of my own project. The series is made up of black and white photographs of Mann's three children, taken over several years in their home and surrounding landscape in rural Virginia. The images are intimate, raw, and often confrontational - capturing not just the appearance of childhood, but the psychological and emotional weight that often sits underneath it. What draws me in is how Mann portrays youth without sentimentality. Her children appear barefoot, half-dressed, bruised, bored, defiant, or entirely lost in their own inner world. There's often a sense of pause in the images; moments between actions. It's not playful, but it is emotionally charged. These photographs don't explain themselves; they leave space for the viewer to sit with uncertainty, which in itself mirrors the experience of growing up. It's awkward and unexplainable.

Looking at my contact sheet I've started to notice similar qualities emerging, even unintentionally. These images contain a certain awkwardness, where my niece seems caught between being present and retreating into herself. There's a lack of clear expression, but it doesn't feel empty, it feels like she's negotiating her space in front of the camera, and that hesitation is actually what makes the images feel true. Like Mann, I'm learning that the quiet, unresolved moments can hold the most depth.

Ryan's comment about the "in-between" really stuck with me. It's made me think differently about how I work with my subject, not trying to extract emotion or expression, but allowing whatever's already there to surface gently. Mann's work shows that youth isn't always loud or expressive; often it's uncertain, introverted, or caught in a space of becoming. That's something I want to keep exploring—how to photograph that in-betweenness without pushing it, and how the camera can be a tool for witnessing rather than directing.



Joseph Szabo, Almost Grown, 1978

Joseph Szabo’s work, especially in his series Almost Grown, is a powerful study of adolescence captured with honesty and sensitivity. As both a high school teacher and photographer, Szabo had rare access to the lives of teenagers, documenting their real experiences with a quiet observational style. His portraits are direct and emotionally loaded, often catching his subjects in moments of reflection, resistance, or vulnerability. These images feel authentic not because they’re dramatic, but because they show youth as it truly is - awkward, unsure, sometimes bold, sometimes uncertain.

One image that particularly resonates with me is Priscilla (1969). In it, a young girl stares just off from the camera with a deeply expressive mixture of attitude, boredom, and self-consciousness. Her body language, hand on hip, cigarette in mouth suggests confidence, but her gaze tells a more complicated story. That contradiction feels so truthful to how it feels to be young: aware of being watched, slightly performative, but also still trying to figure yourself out. There’s an emotional texture in that image that feels raw and unresolved, which is exactly what makes it so compelling. In my own portraits, particularly the recent contact sheet of my niece, I see echoes of Priscilla. Not in style necessarily, but in emotional tone. My niece carries that same slight discomfort in front of the camera, a sense of being visible but unsure of how to be seen. Just like Priscilla, she’s not performing a role; she’s in the middle of becoming someone. That awkwardness, that emotional in-betweenness, is what I’m drawn to, and what I want to hold space for in my work.

Szabo’s ability to connect with his subjects, without forcing anything or over-directing has made me think more carefully about my own approach. It’s not about catching the “perfect” shot, but about creating an environment where real emotion can quietly surface. Priscilla reminds me that youth doesn’t need to be loud or overly expressive to be powerful.



Film Inspiration: C'mon C'mon, 2021

C'mon C'mon has been a significant influence on my approach in discussing and photographing youth. The film's portrayal of childhood—through the tender, sometimes chaotic relationship between an uncle and his nephew—captures the emotional complexity of growing up in a way that feels honest and deeply human. What resonates most with me is how the film doesn't try to simplify childhood; instead, it holds space for both innocence and difficulty, joy and confusion.

The way the child is allowed to be vulnerable, moody, playful, and reflective mirrors what I'm trying to do in my portraits—especially with my niece. Like the film, I'm not aiming to capture a performance of childhood, but rather, to be present in its quieter, in-between moments. The conversations in C'mon C'mon -some spoken, some just felt, remind me of the gentle dialogue I have with her while I photograph. It's not about directing, but about listening and being available for whatever unfolds. That closeness, that attentiveness, is something I carry into every frame.



Additionally, both 'Little Miss Sunshine' and 'The Florida Project' have subtly shaped how I think about portraying youth. Little Miss Sunshine captures the quiet resilience and individuality of a child navigating adult chaos, while The Florida Project shows the freedom and fragility of childhood in unstable surroundings. Both films trust the child's perspective, embracing contradiction, playfulness, and emotional depth - qualities I'm aiming to hold in my own work.

Second Shoot – Reflection

These photographs are from my second shoot, and while I'm not fully content with the result, the process felt valuable. I don't see these particular photographs as portfolio-worthy, but I'm pleased with the direction the project is heading. There's a quiet honesty in it that aligns with the purity I'm trying to maintain throughout the series. These were shot digitally, which was a shift for me, I prefer the timeless, unplaceable quality of film. Digital feels too grounded in the present for this subject, and I'm not yet confident with editing software like Lightroom (which is something I hope to work on in the future). Still, this shoot marks another step forward. Even if it isn't the final outcome I envision, every stage matters.



Photographically, this image is quite minimal but intentional. I used a centred composition to create balance and draw attention directly to the subject, allowing her body language and expression to carry the emotional weight of the frame. I shot using available natural light, positioning her near a window with closed blinds to gently diffuse the light, this softened any harsh shadows and created a more subdued, even tone across her face and surroundings.

I chose to go black and white during post-processing to remove colour distractions and highlight tonal contrast and texture - especially in the knitted jumper, the bedsheets, and the linear structure of the blinds. The lack of colour also adds to the sense of timelessness I'm aiming for, making the image feel more universal and emotionally grounded. I worked with a shallow depth of field to keep the focus on her while letting the background fall slightly out of focus, helping isolate her figure and maintain intimacy.



Information as research

As I photograph youth in a quiet, observational way, I'm also thinking about what it means to be young in today's world. We often talk about protecting children as an idea, but the reality in the UK right now shows how urgent that need truly is. According to the NHS, in 2023, one in five children and young people aged 8 to 25 in England had a probable mental health disorder; an alarming rise that reflects the increasing pressures young people face (NHS Digital, 2023). Alongside this, the cost of living crisis is having a direct impact on children's wellbeing. A recent report from the Office for National Statistics revealed that over 30% of families with children reported struggling to afford essentials, including food and heating (ONS, 2024). This level of insecurity affects how children grow, how safe they feel, and how emotionally supported they are.

There's also growing concern around social media. The Children's Commissioner for England notes that by the age of 12, almost all children are active on social media, with many encountering harmful content long before they are emotionally ready to navigate it (Children's Commissioner, 2023). This constant exposure disrupts the natural boundaries of childhood, placing pressure on identity, appearance, and behaviour.

As a photographer, I'm not setting out to document crisis directly, but these statistics form the silent backdrop of my work. The still, quiet portraits I make of my niece are a response to that noise. They're a small, personal way of reclaiming space for reflection, care, and visibility. In a world that asks too much of our youth too soon, this project feels like a way to say: I see you. You deserve to be protected.

References

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NHS Digital (2023) Mental Health of Children and Young People in England, 2023 – Wave 4 follow up to the 2017 survey. <https://digital.nhs.uk/data-and-information/publications/statistical/mental-health-of-children-and-young-people-in-england/2023-wave-4-follow-up>

Office for National Statistics (ONS) (2024) Impact of the rising cost of living on families with children in the UK. <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/bulletins/householdcostsindicesforukhouseholdgroups/octobertodecember2024#:~:text=Non%20retired%20households%20continued%20to,the%20year%20to%20December%202024.>

Rineke Dijkstra, Beach Portraits, 2002

Rineke Dijkstra has recently become a key influence in the development of my project. Her ability to capture transitional moments, especially in young people has made me look at my own work with a new kind of attentiveness. What stands out to me is her commitment to honesty; she never forces expression or sentiment. Instead, her portraits are shaped by stillness, subtlety, and presence. That approach aligns deeply with what I've been trying to do particularly in photographing my niece, not to direct, but to observe.

Her Beach Portraits series really struck me. The awkwardness in the body language, the held tension, the vulnerability in the eyes; there's something so human and unpolished in those images. That sense of not-yet-formed identity is exactly what I've begun to notice in my own images, and Dijkstra has helped me understand that those uncertain or restrained moments are often the most truthful.

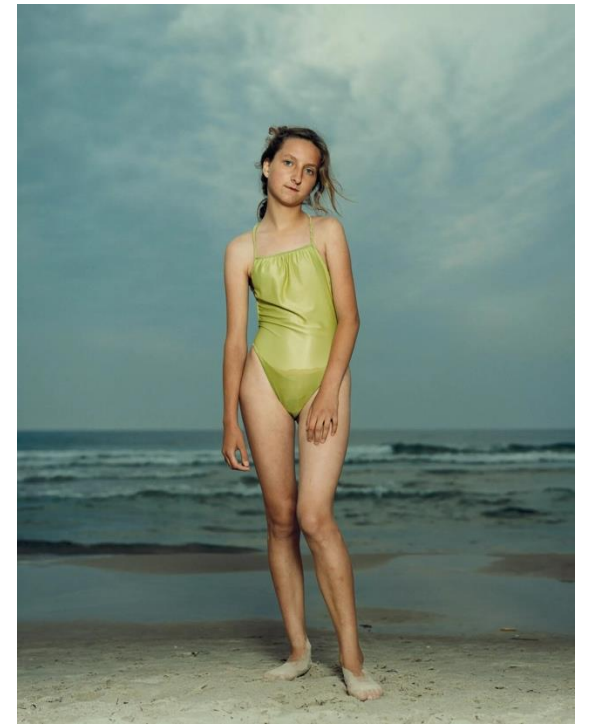
What inspires me most is how she creates space for her subjects to just be and how she trusts that the emotional depth will reveal itself through posture, expression, or even silence. I want to follow that lead and continue shaping my project through observation, empathy, and an openness to whatever moment appears. Dijkstra's influence is pushing me to slow down, look longer, and value stillness as a tool for emotional clarity.

What I find most inspiring about Rineke Dijkstra isn't just the subjects she photographs, but how she approaches them with such care and control. Technically, she often uses a large format or medium format film camera, which naturally slows everything down, both for her and her subjects. That slower process requires stillness, and you can feel it in the way her portraits hold tension. There's no rush. That sense of time and presence is something I deeply admire and want to bring into my own work, even though I have been shooting digitally.

Her use of natural or subtle flash lighting is incredibly effective. It keeps the image clean and consistent while allowing the focus to remain on the person in front of the lens. She removes clutter, often shooting in front of neutral backdrops or minimal locations like beaches, blank walls, or tiled rooms. This reduction of environment draws all attention to body language and expression. Her portraits are so technically balanced, framed symmetrically, tonally even, and incredibly sharp but they never feel clinical. They feel honest and human.

In contrast, my second shoot was done digitally, and it felt fast and slightly unfamiliar. I'm not as confident with digital tools, especially editing software like Lightroom, and I found it difficult to replicate the tonal softness and timeless quality I associate with film. Film has a texture and subtle unpredictability that I'm drawn to - it feels more emotional, more unplaceable. That's what I want in my project: a sense that these images could belong to any time, any place. I'm realising that while digital offers accessibility, film aligns more with the emotional tone I'm trying to achieve.

Dijkstra's practice encourages me to slow down and trust in the quiet power of observation. Whether I continue with film or learn to better control my digital process, I want to shoot with that same intention to give space for stillness, and to focus technically on what allows emotion to surface without interference.





Fugitive Testimonies Portfolio

Final shoot, 35mm film

Caitlin Doyle





Triptych Analysis

These three portraits represent the culmination of my project, images that I feel most clearly articulate the emotional tone, visual language, and personal connection I've been building toward. Shot on black and white film, this triptych holds a quiet power through its stillness, repetition, and restraint. The subject -my niece- stands as a central figure across each frame, but her surroundings subtly shift, revealing a domestic, familiar landscape that never fully explains itself. What stays consistent is her presence: grounded, watchful, and emotionally unreadable in a way that feels true to what it means to be young.

Contextually, the series is rooted in a concern for how youth exists today. In a world that increasingly rushes children toward adulthood through media, social pressure, instability, this work pushes back. It offers a slower, quieter form of observation, one that values emotional ambiguity and stillness. Each image becomes a moment of pause. They don't shout or over-explain. Instead, they hold space for what youth *feels* like: awkward, in-between, vulnerable but resilient. Her bare feet, oversized jeans, and simple black t-shirt make her feel timeless, she could belong to any generation, any setting. That's intentional. These images are not just of *my* niece, but for every young person navigating that unspoken stretch between childhood and adulthood.

Conceptually, this triptych draws from the influences of Rineke Dijkstra and Joseph Szabo, both of whom understand youth as a state of internal contradiction. Like Dijkstra, I used a neutral expression and centred composition to amplify presence without forcing emotion. Like Szabo, I allowed the environment to subtly inform the portrait, these aren't set against studio backdrops, but grounded in a quiet, domestic reality: washing lines, swing sets, broken fences. These symbols of everyday life echo themes of care, play, and impermanence. There's no clear narrative here, and that's the point. The portraits sit in tension, between knowing and unknowing, comfort and uncertainty.

Technically, shooting on film added everything I was missing from earlier digital attempts. The softness of the tones, the grain, and the slight unpredictability in texture give these images a quality that's emotionally richer and more grounded. The composition is deliberately consistent central framing, eye-level perspective, no dramatic angles. Lighting was natural and unforced, and the choice to shoot toward dusk allowed for a muted tonal range that adds to the quiet mood. Nothing is overly exposed or stylised; instead, I let the imperfections of film, the rawness, the softness do some of the emotional work.

Exhibition-wise, presenting this work as a triptych reinforces the themes of repetition, continuity, and subtle change. Seen together, these portraits invite the viewer to slow down and observe carefully to notice what shifts, and what doesn't. Pay attention. The consistent framing across all three images gives them unity, while the slightly changing environments create a quiet visual rhythm. This format mirrors the experience of youth itself each day almost the same, but slightly different, building into something larger over time. Displaying these at a large equal scale and spacing would allow for an intimate but impactful viewing experience, encouraging close looking and emotional reflection.

Exhibition Outcome

This exhibition outcome marks the final stage of a process I've been slowly shaping throughout the term. In previous reflections, I discussed how the triptych functions emotionally, technically, and conceptually, how it embodies stillness, routine, and the quiet weight of growing up. These ideas remain central, but now, seeing the work physically on the wall, I've come to understand how those choices translate into a real space and how they're received by others.

These three film portraits were always the strongest visual and emotional reflection of what I wanted the project to become. Their stillness, repetition, and stripped-back composition allow the viewer to focus on the subtleties of the subject's expression and environment. Shot on black and white film, they carry a sense of timelessness and ambiguity—something I explored in earlier digital attempts, but only fully achieved through film. The decision to present them as a triptych came from a discussion on rhythm and emotional pacing, which helped solidify the importance of viewing these images in sequence.

Following tutorial advice, I worked on maintaining a clean, minimal presentation. The decision not to frame the images allows them to remain intimate and uninterrupted. I also carefully considered the flow building somewhat of a narrative across the images to guide the viewer through emotional layers, building gently across the three frames.

Print preparation was done in Photoshop, mostly to maintain tonal consistency while retaining the softness of the film grain but ensuring a level of sharpness and clarity so everything was still visual. I kept editing minimal to protect the rawness that is essential to the project's honesty. Working with matte vinyl prints allowed the final images to feel tactile and quiet on the wall, echoing the emotional tone of the work.

The install itself was completed by Ryan but I can acknowledge it was simple and methodical - measuring, levelling, adjusting spacing with intent. This part of the project gave me a deeper appreciation for how photographic work lives in space and the added power exhibiting gives artists and their work. The opening was affirming; people slowed down in front of the work, engaged with the subtlety, and connected with the quiet emotion I hoped to convey. It was a confirmation.



Artist statement

Caitlin Doyle's black-and-white film portraits offer an intimate exploration of childhood's in-between moments, capturing her seven-year-old niece with both tenderness and insight. Through this deeply personal lens, Doyle reveals the quiet tension between innocence and self-awareness, joy and uncertainty—framing the child's experience as a reflection of the psychological complexities of growing up in an era overshadowed by uncertainty.

By rejecting digital modernity in favour of black-and-white film, Doyle embraces nostalgia as an act of quiet resistance—a means of preserving a fleeting, unfiltered reality. This deliberate choice not only evokes the tactile imperfection of memory but also stands in contrast to a present moment increasingly defined by detachment and anxiety.

In a time where societal hope feels fragile, these portraits serve as a reminder: childhood is both delicate and profound, and it is our responsibility to protect it. Through these images, Doyle invites us to pause, reflect, and reconsider the weight of the world we are handing to the next generation.

Overview

This project began with a quiet question: how do we look at youth without trying to define it? Through the process of photographing my niece, observing rather than directing, I've been exploring what it means to document childhood not through play or performance, but through stillness, awkwardness, and emotional ambiguity. The work has grown through slow dialogue, both with my subject and with myself. Each stage, from early digital tests to final film portraits, has taught me more about patience, trust, and the value of restraint in portraiture.

Conceptually, this project has deepened my interest in the unspoken, those subtle, transitional moments where nothing dramatic happens, but everything feels significant. Influences like Rineke Dijkstra, Sally Mann, Joseph Szabo, and the quiet intimacy of films like *C'mon C'mon* have shaped the emotional tone of the work. The final triptych, exhibited without frames, reflects the core of what I wanted to achieve: clarity, softness, and emotional proximity without spectacle.

Looking ahead, I hope to build on what I've started here; continuing to work within portraiture and film, further refining my use of light and tone, and possibly expanding the project into a longer-term series. I'd love to explore themes of youth across different environments or within other family dynamics, deepening the relational and documentary elements. I also want to become more confident with analogue printing processes (as well as competent among digital processes) and challenge myself to incorporate text or voice as part of the work, adding new dimensions to how quiet stories can be told.

This project has shown me that subtle work has strength, and that careful, honest observation can be just as powerful as any statement. I hope my next project carries that same intent forward, with more confidence, curiosity, and care.

,Caitlin Doyle

A World of Colour & Emotion, Satta Hashem

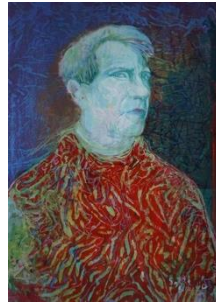
Leicester Museum & Art Gallery

Walking into *A World of Colour & Emotion*, visitors are immediately enveloped in a vibrant, deeply human landscape, a world sculpted by Satta Hashem's extraordinary life journey from Iraq to Leicester. This is more than an art exhibition: it is a meditation on exile, survival, memory, and hope, painted with stunning emotional clarity.

Hashem's canvases are alive with saturated hues, burnt ochres, searing blues, blood reds, colours that seem to bleed with the intensity of lived experience. His palette alone tells a story: it echoes the ruins of Mesopotamia, the heavy skies of Europe, and the bittersweet nostalgia of a homeland lost to conflict. It is colour not just as decoration, but as a language of grief and resilience.

Hashem's early work as a political illustrator in Arabic newspapers is powerfully evident here, informing a certain graphic strength and economy of line. Even in his most abstracted works, there is a clarity of form - a sense of urgent communication, as though each piece is both a personal exorcism and a message to the world. Recurring throughout his paintings are haunting faces, rendered with mask-like stillness. These figures, often influenced by ancient Sumerian sculpture, seem at once timeless and immediate. Their wide, unblinking eyes and solemn gazes confront the viewer with the psychological weight of displacement and war. Yet, they are not passive victims: there is resilience, even defiance, in their stares. In evoking the ancient past, Hashem suggests that the cycles of destruction and endurance are as old as civilization itself.

What is particularly striking about Hashem's approach is how he fuses personal memory with collective history. His art feels rooted in the soil of Iraq, but it blooms again in Leicester, where he has lived since 2000. In this way, his work becomes a bridge, between ancient and contemporary, East and West, past trauma and future hope. It reminds us that migration is not just a matter of geography, but of identity, and that artists carry not only their skills, but their entire histories with them.



One of the most powerful aspects of *A World of Colour & Emotion* is the interplay between Satta Hashem's evocative paintings and the ancient Sumerian artefacts loaned by the Ashmolean Museum. These relics do more than contextualise his work, they deepen its emotional and historical resonance. They remind us that the creative expressions of war-torn regions are rooted in some of the world's oldest civilizations, and that these stories are not only valid but vital.

As Leicester Museums rightly observe, "Hashem's work reflects his Iraqi heritage, using deep saturated colours to explore how art can make sense of life, death and war and the role of the artist in conflict." His paintings speak in a language of survival and remembrance, offering neither easy answers nor aesthetic detachment. Myself, Leicester-based artist, witnessing Hashem's portraits not only did I feel the emotional impact I felt inspired. There is a clear connection, working in large-format portraiture. My own work explores the tension between intimacy and confrontation: faces rendered so large there's nowhere else to look. The viewer is forced into presence, into experiencing what the subject, and by extension the artist asks them to confront. Like Hashem, I'm fascinated that you can capture a person's lifetime and untold stories. These portraits become more than images; they are legacies. They carry histories across borders and defy the silence that conflict, migration, and marginalisation often impose. This exhibition doesn't just reflect Leicester's multicultural heartbeat, it affirms it. Hashem's presence in this city is not a footnote; it's a testament to what Leicester represents. His work speaks not only of Iraq, but of global displacement, of fractured belonging, of the creative will to persist. And this is why our local museums matter. Leicester Museum & Art Gallery is more than a guardian of artefacts; it is a living space for dialogue, reflection, and cultural continuity. In an age where artists and institutions alike are under increasing pressure and erasure, supporting these spaces becomes not just important, but urgent.

In the end, *A World of Colour & Emotion* is not merely a retrospective, it is a profound statement about art's power to bear witness, to build bridges, and to speak for those who history often overlooks. Hashem's work - like the faces I try to capture - demands that we stop, look, and reckon with the world beyond our comfort. It is a gift to Leicester, to the global art community, and to all who understand the responsibility of creative legacy. This is an exhibition that yields power for the victims of violence, those displaced and heritage forced to be abandoned.