

# VOGUE

GREECE



## WINNING SPIRIT

GREECE MEN'S NATIONAL WATER POLO TEAM & ROSANNA GEORGIU BY RICHARD PHIBBS

IOVINOE-ANTOYTOIOT2024 TIMH-4E



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GREECE



## WINNING SPIRIT

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GREECE



**WINNING SPIRIT**

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**WINNING SPIRIT**

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## WINNING SPIRIT

STEFANOS  
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Osman Yousefzada curating a work of his for the exhibition *Where It Began* at the Cartwright Hall Art Gallery of Yorkshire.

# HERE, THERE & EVERYWHERE

Telling stories of migration and of women's hidden lives, interdisciplinary artist and writer **OSMAN YOUSEFZADA** is reaching a *huge global audience* thanks to his immersive site *specific exhibitions*

in galleries throughout the world and his coming-of-age memoir *The Go-Between* about growing up in a closed Muslim working class community in Birmingham, England.

SARAH BAILEY met the poetic freedom fighter about his **RESTLESS CREATIVE JOURNEY** and having 'bigger conversations'

ART

**PALAZZO FRANCHETTI VENICE.** An evocative soundscape seems to cast a spell as visitors enter the immersive exhibition by artist Osman Yousefzada. Titled *Welcome! A Palazzo For Immigrants* the site-specific installation combines music, video, handcrafted textile works and sculptural pieces, some exquisitely rendered in handblown Murano glass (the latter created in collaboration with Venetian Fondazione Berengo). It's a meditative space that implicitly invites the visitor to linger, reflect and dream.

'Foreigners Everywhere' is the theme of the 60th Venice Biennale and Yousefzada's exhibition, which explores the themes of migration ancient and modern, feels particularly apt, rooted in the artist's own autobiographical narrative of growing up in the UK, the British-born son of a Pakistani father and Afghan mother. It also engages with the history of Venice as a nexus of travellers and trade, built on the incessant movement of people; "a city of immigrants," as Nadja Romain, Venetian resident and co-curator with Amin Jaffer of the exhibition, puts it. "In Osman's work there is constant reflection about what it means to come from a different culture, being raised far away from your roots; and being this go-between, who is born in a different country from their parents."

Wind back a year: I first met Yousefzada in an elegant South Kensington gallery in London, where he was showing a small solo show *Rituals and Spells* (a continuation of the vast site specific solo exhibition *What Is Seen And What Is Not* which he showed at the city's prestigious Victoria & Albert Museum to mark the 75th anniversary of Pakistan in 2022). Here, polychromatic tapestries - one featuring a talisman displaying its tongue, evoking goddess Kali - and painted figures of androgynous leaping spirits bedecked the walls, while enigmatic sculptural shapes were clustered on the floor. I was a little early for my interview, so I joined a huddle of admirers, grouped around the artist, as he elucidated his work. The impish "intersex" (of no-sex) figures were inspired by the *Falnama*, or the *Book of Omens*, traditionally used as tarot cards in Turkey, Iran and India, he explained; adding that the experience of





CERAMIC WORKS OF OSMAN YOUSEFZADA AT THE *WHERE IT BEGAN* EXHIBITION AT CARTWRIGHT HALL ART GALLERY. OPPOSITE PAGE: INSTALLATION OF THE ARTIST AT THE *WELCOME! A PALAZZO FOR IMMIGRANTS* EXHIBITION AT THE PALAZZO CAVALLIFRENCHETTI IN VENICE.

a migrant could be likened to the act of turning over a tarot card: "When you turn over a tarot card, you don't really know what your chances are, what your future is, and when you migrate, you don't really know whether you are going to be a successful migrant, what you are really going to achieve or not."

He also wanted to draw attention to the small, slickly glazed small ceramic sculptures that seemed to gleam under the gallery lights like supernatural gourds (these forms are a repeated trope in his work). Pulling out his phone, he scrolled the camera feed for some personal photographs, taken at his childhood home not long after his mother passed away (in 2022). The photographs appeared to show nothing more than wrinkled, knotted carrier bags, it was not immediately clear what he wanted us to see. "These are humble objects, maybe slippers, a pot or some cloth. This is how my mum stored everything she owned, wrapped in plastic bags, knotted like this. That's how I found her possessions in her cupboard after she died. She never hung anything up."

The poignant realities of the migrant experience, of leaving and perhaps never really arriving, of living in a state of constant readiness and transience ("akin to a Holocaust

survivor with a packed suitcase under the bed")... These are some of the themes explored in Yousefzada's work - whether in interdisciplinary installations in gallery settings, or in his writing which is accessible to much broader audiences. He is the author of the astonishing, deeply touching and humorously bittersweet memoir *The Go Between - A Portrait of Growing Up Between Different Worlds* which paints vivid vignettes about navigating a closed oppressively patriarchal Pashtun Muslim community in the British Midlands in the 1980s. First published in 2022, it has already become an important text - unpicked in book groups and community writers' workshops. The great British actor and writer Stephen Fry called it "one of the greatest childhood memoirs of our time".

The term polymath seems barely adequate to describe 46-year-old Yousefzada's creative breadth. As readers of *VOGUE*, you will doubtless be familiar with the eponymous fashion label which he founded in 2008; his creations worn by the likes of Beyoncé and Lady Gaga. He chose to step away from the fashion industry a couple of years ago and is not particularly interested in revisiting it in interviews. In any case, as Nadja Romain, points out "Osman has always been an artist", whether pouring

his redoubtable energies into, publishing the high end zine *The Collective*, which pushed the boundaries of fashion and art publishing (something he began in 2013), or participating in avant-garde group exhibitions alongside with names like Eddie Peake and Celia Hempton (an occasional muse).

In 2018, he staged his first solo art show *Being Somewhere Else* at The Ikon Gallery in Birmingham - a multi-media installation inspired by his mother and her 'migrant's bedroom'. It was a career accolade, of course; but one which had enormous personal resonance. When Yousefzada visited the show with his then elderly mother (who for the majority of her adult life had not been permitted to move freely about the city), she was baffled by the vast institutional space, quizzing her son as to why there would be a bed in such a place and more particularly, who actually slept there?

Yousefzada grew up in Balsall Heath, Birmingham, a working class area of the city, in a closed religious Pakistani - Pashtun Muslim community. His parents were illiterate - they could neither read nor write in English, nor their mother tongue. His father was a carpenter, who arrived in the UK in the '60s to work in a foundry. His

mother, who married when she was just 14, came from a family of skilled artisans and was a talented seamstress, who could cut, sew and embroider without patterns "like a sculptor" (it was through attentively watching her that Yousefzada learned how to sew himself). The Pashtun community arrived in Britain, in the '60s and '70s to work in factories, though the de-industrialization of the '80s meant that community grew inward, more religious, more orthodox, more closed. For the female members of this community this meant their world grew smaller, their freedoms and their rights to education and agency fiercely constrained. When Yousefzada's sisters turned 11 they were taken out of school and compelled to live quite literally behind the curtain, in the "women's quarters" in the terraced house where he and his siblings lived with their parents on a single floor.

This is the story that *The Go-Between* tells - the coming of age tale of an inquisitive, fiercely intelligent child, who slips between two worlds: The orthodox Pakistani - Pashtun homelife (where until he reaches adolescence he can take comfort from the female domain of his mother's sewing salon with its chatter, community and camaraderie). And the allure and dangers of the 'outside world' in secular, sexually permissive urban

Britain. Ironically, the immigrant community shared their neighbourhood with the city's red light district.

There is so much humanity in the book. I loved reading the episode when young Osman recounts a shoe-shopping errand he has been tasked with for his mother; a mission he accepts with delight, contriving to visit a store where provocative Bollywood stars' footwear is a speciality and a half-understood eroticism simmers. Another chapter on 'Mrs Thatcher's hair' humorously bestows a lustrous sensuality to the ferocious female premier's iconic bouffant, bathing the reader in the painful nostalgia of adolescent nostalgia, weighted in heavy burden of the curious child, who must decide which world he will ultimately occupy.

Yousefzada does not shy away from representing egregious incidents, including honour-based violence. It must have taken enormous courage to write such a revelatory text and he admits that its publication has brought painful consequences and estrangement from some members of his family. On another occasion, when I listened to him read from his memoir at a London Fashion Week event, he explained the moral imperative he felt to lift the curtain on the oppression of women in the community,

in simple words: "I had to because these things were happening."

Over the last 12 months since our first conversation, it has been thrilling to observe the impact and momentum of Yousefzada's artistic output. Among many other exhibits and interventions, his short film *Her Dreams Are Bigger* which gives a voice to Bangladeshi garment workers, was screened in Edinburgh - a bold finale to 'Beyond The Little Black Dress' at the National Museum of Scotland. At The Whitechapel Gallery in London's East End I got to visit his installation *An Immigrant's Room of Their Own*, where he had filled a vintage dressing table with soil, referencing the Muslim tradition of burying hair (to guard against evil). And given his ongoing interest in Virginia Woolf's iconic text *A Room Of Her Own*, his exhibition at historic Charleston House in the Sussex countryside, the former home of The Bloomsbury Group, had a poetic resonance (showing alongside works by David Hockney, the octogenarian darling of British art, a career high point indeed!).

And now, at the Cartwright Hall Museum in Bradford Yorkshire, another solo show has just opened, aptly titled *Where It All Began* (Bradford having long been at the heart of the British textile trade, home to incoming communities of Asian migrant





FROM THE LEFT: STILL FROM THE EXHIBITION IN VENICE, A WORK BY THE ARTIST AND THE CO-CURATOR OF THE WELCOME! A PALAZZO FOR IMMIGRANTS EXHIBITION, NADIA ROMANI.

workers and artisans, and where Osman's father first arrived in the UK to work in a foundry). Among the exhibits, Yousefzada has wrapped some of the museum's existing objects including a marble bust of Queen Victoria who has been clad in swathes of chintz (a supersized version of his mother's wrapped possessions). Of course, all this is set against a political context where immigration is a hot button issue not just in the UK, but across the whole of Europe. Yousefzada explains that he wants to bring his art and his hopeful message of freedom to the widest possible community, which is why he collaborated with the arts organisation Artichoke on 5000 billboards up and down the country, with the simple message 'More Migrants Please' spelled out on the image of a welcoming carpet of Eastern design.

At the Venice Biennale, there is the opportunity for international audiences to experience Yousefzada's artwork and contemplate his poetic cry for freedom for the next few months (the show runs until October 7th). Inside the Palazzo Franchetti, the world he has created is surreal and dreamlike. The central installation combines his signature wrapped forms and other talismanic objects exquisitely rendered in mouth blown Venetian Murano glass. Two large plaits of 'hair' descend from

the ceiling - these extravagant lengths of braided hair are another repeated symbol in Yousefzada's work, representing control over female agency and power (his mother always wore her hair in a plait). On one of the walls, a cross of braided hair represents his illiterate mother's 'signature'. This is how she was taught to make her mark on her official papers when she migrated, Yousefzada explains. Before she moved to the UK, the way she made her mark was with an inked thumb print, as customary in the East.

"Yousefzada's practice casts light on displacement and dispossession, fundamental aspects of the immigrant experience," notes co-Curator Amin Jaffer. "In Venice, a place renowned for its production of glass and textiles, his works take on a different dimension given the city's traditional role as a gateway to the East and an entrepôt of exotic goods and people. The significance of the exhibition is underlined by the ongoing immigrant crisis in Europe today."

Interestingly, at the time of writing, Yousefzada's show does not have a banner outside Palazzo Franchetti. As curator Nadja Romain recounts: "When we asked the authorization for the banner, it took like forever and then it came back to us, saying that they didn't like the title. They

were afraid that people would think it was [literally] a palazzo for immigrants [a refuge]... We could have changed the title, but we just decided to keep it."

Banner or no banner, the show has been exceptionally popular with visitors, often choose to sit, linger and read the catalogue, which pleases Romani: "People stay there in a sort of meditation and that's beautiful because it's not something that [the exhibition] tells you to do, people do it naturally... There's something quite magical that happens when people really engage with the work."

"There's something so touching about it, so human, people really do resonate with it. But in the meantime, it's also quite controversial," Romain says with a wry half-smile. "It's about bringing conversations that people don't really want to have, it addresses some things that people don't want to hear, but in a sense it's a conversation that can only grow."

I can only agree. Yousefzada is a voice that demands to be heard. His is a vision that is as enchanting as it is arresting. His work presents an urgent plea for hope, crossing borders and coming together with more compassion and more understanding, which not everyone will find easy. And that's why it's utterly pertinent to our times. ■