

## **Black History Month: Images from The People's Portrait of Sandwell**

*“Nearly all the images of where people live come to them from outside: when people see their community in the media, they see pictures of poverty and helplessness, or they see official brochures, which are just as false. These show ideal people in an unrecognisable glossy setting, designed to attract industry: happy shoppers in perpetual sunshine, cosy old folk knitting in serene and leafy old people's homes, smiling workers in a factory without smell or pollution. The result is that images of Sandwell (or Walsall or Leeds or Glasgow) make it look either like Calcutta or California; a distorted view that has nothing to do with the people who actually live there.”*

Written in 1990, this was the introduction by Jeremy Seabrook to the exhibition 'Sandwell in Black & White', one of a series of exhibitions which were part of the 'The People's Portrait Project' organised by Jubilee Arts between 1988 and 1993.

In 2011, with the vast reach of social networking sites and hand held technologies to capture and record, this statement may not be as true as it once was. Though we might argue that any viewing of a Myspace or Facebook or Flickr enforces a stereotype of sameness and repetition, the modern 'ideal people', endless copies of everyone drinking, puckering lips, posing, partying, holidaying.

The continuing relevance of 'The People's Portrait Project' is that it was intended as an antidote to stereotypical representations of local people. Sandwell has almost always been portrayed in negative and pejorative terms, perhaps from the point when it was said Queen Victoria asked for the blinds of her train be drawn as she passed through, so her eyes would not be offended by this awful, black country. The original inspiration for the project was a notorious article in the Sunday Times Colour Supplement in 1984, where the journalist decried his experience of Sandwell as 'probably the most depressing story I have ever worked on in my career'. At that time, community artists from Jubilee were working with some young break dance groups in Smethwick, who said, 'Yeah, of course there's some bad things here, but they don't ever show us in a positive light do they?' They were particularly annoyed by a photograph of black youth shown staring out from behind the bars of a police station – who, as it turned out, were actually a group of apprentices on a visit to the station and not young offenders. Media studies groups used it as an example of misrepresentation, a partial view of outsiders flying in for 48 hours. And so 'Ghetto Britain – Black Country Blues' became something of a *cause célèbre*, locally and nationally.

Jubilee Arts was an organisation that championed the need for communities to have control of their representation by challenging negative stereotypes and sharing aspects of their life experiences and achievements. Through a process of partnership with local communities, they were able to uncover the hidden histories and create a new vision of

contemporary life through exhibitions, books, video, drama, music and other art forms. What these projects did was to reflect everyday life in the community and involve community members in their production, particularly in the editorial process. There are three core exhibitions that these images have been mostly drawn from.

The exhibition 'Bickle' (1989) began life as an oral history project with Afro-Caribbean elders and the idea of making a cookbook. It became a large-scale exhibition of photographic portraits by Maxine Walker and Nigel Madhoo, along with texts and recipes taken from interviews organised by Beverley Harvey and Gary Stewart.

'Sandwell in Black & White' (1990), co-ordinated by Brendan Jackson and Sue Green, took the idea of mass participation by inviting a diverse group of residents (64 in total) to each have a camera for a week over the period of a year and document their life and have the final say over which images they wished to be in the exhibition. Most of them, interestingly, did not normally use a camera. In Sandwell, the year began with images from a paramedic during the Ambulance Strike and ended with a teenagers photographs of anti-war protests as the First Gulf War was about to be unleashed. (This project was later repeated with an arts group in Northern California, creating 'Mendocino in Black & White' (1994) with 160 people over a six month period.)

'My Mother, My Daughter, Myself' (1992) looked at three generations of Asian women living in Smethwick. An editorial group of women worked with photographers Fiona Bailey and Jeevan Singh to collect oral histories and portraits.

All three exhibitions were shown locally and nationally, in a variety of alternative venues – a town hall or civic centre, shopping centre or community centre. Other photographic exhibitions in the series included 'The Wedding Day' (1988), a behind the scenes look at two Sikh Weddings by Paramjit Singh and 'The Golden Mile' (1987), documentation of West Bromwich high street by Peter Singh, John Gayle and Michael Richards.

The images in this show are not intended to represent black history *per se*. They are images of people who lived and worked in Sandwell at a particular time, long enough ago to be now part of the historical fabric of the area. Some of the people in these images have sadly passed away, some have migrated, and some continue to live and grow in Sandwell. These images will outlast our own memory of them, and as part of an archive will be found and seen in another 100 years. The projects of the past can be windows to the future; only through the involvement and engagement of local people can we continue to be proud of our diversity, to tell the unknown stories and celebrate our achievements.

***Beverley Harvey and Brendan Jackson October 2010***