



'York Hall' from the series
*The Fighting Spirit
of South London*

BEYOND BARRIERS

She is inspired by working with young people and her passion for martial arts. As Aneesa Dawoojee FRPS stages a solo show at RPS Gallery, she explains why human stories matter

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'Egdon' from the series *March of the Humming Birds*

After being promoted from mediator to senior management at Alone in London – a charity that supports young people experiencing or at risk of homelessness – Aneesa Dawoojee would find any excuse to return to the front line.

She would sit in reception and chat to the young people as they came in and out of the office so she could hear directly about their experiences. That way, she could be sure their needs were being represented.

As an inter-generational mediator, Dawoojee had come to know some of the young people during outreach programmes in special measures schools, and many more during mediation sessions with their families. This was, she explains, “not necessarily to get them back home, but to give them some kind of support network so they wouldn’t end up in the care system”.

Both roles gave Dawoojee an exceptionally nuanced understanding of the young people’s predicaments. “Every year we put together an impact report,” she explains, “and often it had clichéd pictures of young people in doorways looking unhappy, with no real future ahead of them.” Dawoojee offered to help the charity produce an alternative set of images that reflected who they were.

After 13 years of working with London’s most hard-to-reach and at-risk youths who were fleeing prostitution, gangs and various forms of abuse, Dawoojee specialised in supporting school curriculums with sessions on conflict resolution. This extended to the non-verbal patients at Great Ormond Street hospital school. In 2008 she co-created *Behind Closed Doors*, a short film that went out to every secondary school in London. She wholeheartedly believed in the work the charity did to save lives.

An award-winning, self-taught photographer, Dawoojee’s interest in image-making is rooted in a love of art, history and journalism. Her work is being recognised in the media, on the awards circuit, and by funding bodies. Her images have been published in the *British Journal of Photography*, *Forbes Woman Africa*, and volumes four and five of *Portrait of Humanity*. She was shortlisted in the sport category of the AOP Photography Awards, and was awarded the 2023 Power of Photography Award by *Amateur Photographer* magazine for her work on the fight community. She has gained funding from the Arts Council England, Sport England, London Sport and the Mayor’s office of the Greater London Authority.

One of Dawoojee’s first published shoots involved taking a group of youngsters she had supported at Alone in London to



'David' from the series *The Fighting Spirit of South London*

“That’s the thing I lose sleep over: how do I put my work out there so it doesn’t create division, so that it engages to create empathy or trust”

“By hearing the other side you can better understand the challenges of positions and interests. I would like my work to make people hear each other, maybe break down preconceptions”

‘Elicia’ from the series *The Fighting Spirit of South London*



Brick Lane, London, to make a series of pictures. The resulting images were joyful and beautiful, she says, because the young people enjoyed being part of the creative process. This series has informed her relationship with photography and youth charities such as BIGKID Foundation in Brixton and Gloves not Gunz in Croydon. She has set up a scholarship programme to enable access into photography, and mentors local youths using the *RPS Journal* as a tool of inspiration.

The experience of working with charities still informs the way that Dawoojee works. You see it clearly in her acclaimed portrait series *The Fighting Spirit of South London*, from which she submitted four images to the RPS International Photography Exhibition 163.

Mónica Alcázar-Duarte, a selector for the exhibition, said of Dawoojee’s images: “There is a disarming amount of warmth and honesty in Aneesa’s portraits. Her images become a seamless bridge between her, the sitter, and the viewer. As a viewer I feel honoured by being looked back at with the kindness and grace that Aneesa’s sitters show while their portrait is made. What comes alive from these images is as deep as the resilience of the human soul. This body of work is a testament that the soul of humanity is diverse and that there is strength in quietness and softness.”

Following her success in the IPE163, Dawoojee gained her RPS Fellowship. Some of the images that featured in her successful Distinctions submission will be included in her forthcoming solo exhibition *Only Human: Aneesa Dawoojee* at RPS Gallery, Bristol. The photographs show martial artists and combat sport athletes from a gym near her home in

South London. To make them, she drew on her experience as a mediator, listening to and reflecting on the stories of her subjects, and putting their voices at the centre of the series.

“When I practised mediation, I learned that by hearing the other side you can better understand the challenges of positions and interests,” she says. “I would like my work to make people hear each other, maybe break down preconceptions.”

Not long ago, a mentor suggested Dawoojee look at *People of the 20th Century*, the majestic, seven-volume physiognomic survey of the German population that August Sander began in the 1920s and never completed. He was to spend the years until his death in 1964 arranging and rearranging it. Sander’s idea that “Every person’s story is written plainly on his face, though not everyone can read it” felt immediately valuable to Dawoojee.

“It’s more than photography,” she says. “It’s that he’s telling us something. He’s documenting a piece of time, a piece of the world in that moment. And it’s important for us to know about it. I thought it was only painters that did that.”

Included in Dawoojee’s exhibition will be work from a series almost as vaulting in scale as Sander’s – an extended survey of Caribbean people’s experiences in Britain and the West Indies. Dawoojee’s own mother came to the UK from Trinidad in 1962, her father from Mauritius in 1967 – “which feels like an extension of the Caribbean because it’s such a similar culture and history” – and they met in Brixton in 1972. Dawoojee was born in nearby Norbury, where she still lives with her husband and two sons.



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SOCIAL DOCUMENTARY

Given that the work is still in progress, Dawoojee is reluctant to define it too closely, though she says it will be “told by ordinary people, from their perspective”. Weeks before the exhibition she was preparing to travel to Trinidad to photograph some of the cultural events that feed into her new work. Having visited the country many times with her mother as a child, and continuing to do so in her adult life, she knows how much there is to the country, its history and people.

“When you have that Caribbean eyesight, you notice many different things,” she says. “The Caribbean is more than beautiful hotels and beaches. I hope to make others more curious. There are so many gaps in the picture and if people don’t know the story, the history, how will they understand? My intention, as I go on with this project – why it’s taking me so long – is that the images articulate what words cannot.

“I want it to be educational, a bank of work people can draw on. British history curriculum topics have not changed significantly over the years – my local boroughs are trying. But I am still always so surprised that we don’t know much about the commonwealth. So, I do what I can to help see the world with more informed eyes, sharing experiences.”

Though the project includes some of the Windrush generation who came to the UK from the Caribbean between 1948 and 1971, it is not, Dawoojee makes clear, a series about Windrush. “The work hopes to initiate conversation and growth,” she says. “That’s the thing I lose sleep over: how do I put my work out there so that it doesn’t create division, so that it engages to creates empathy or trust.”

In 2021, Dawoojee became a friend of the Windrush Generation Legacy Association in Croydon. She attends fortnightly coffee mornings there and has run workshops in photography, for which FujiFilm supported her by lending her cameras. The relationship goes far beyond that, though. Some of the women she met there were once nurses at the local Mayday – now Croydon General – Hospital where Dawoojee was born. “A lot of them remind me of my mum,” she says. “They feel like aunts that I’ve grown to care a lot for. They support me with this work and on a personal note always question if I’m taking care of my sugars – diabetes.”

Dawoojee explains she has also been commissioned by other Caribbean charities to work with their elders and has a “wonderful support network” in West London connected with



‘James’ from the series *The Fighting Spirit of South London*



Raheema from the series *March of The Humming Birds*

“When I started photographing fighters, I wanted people to see that people like me – and the people I photographed – existed”

The Notting Hill carnival and Trinidad. “I think that’s why community – this thing I am organically drawn to in my work – is so important to me. If I can do community projects till the day I die, if I can be known for showing how powerful a community is – how a stranger can lift your soul – I’ll be happy.”

The sporting community remains fertile creative ground. Dawoojee recently photographed some of the London Youth Games, and is preparing for a second exhibition with Bromley Council exploring sport and diversity. She continues to photograph fighters and has just spent a weekend at York Hall, the international boxing venue in east London, shooting for Combat Fight Series – “Sometimes hanging on to the ropes with one hand to get the shot,” she says. “I wake up the next day and my entire body aches, but it’s a good pain. You can capture a million emotions.”

Fighting has played a huge role in her own story – she learned karate as a little girl, Muay Thai as a teenager, and she met her husband through the sport. In 2020 she

became an ambassador for This Girl Can, the Lottery-funded campaign that encourages women to be active. “It did a lot for my confidence,” says Dawoojee.

So what is it about sport that attracts her? “Sport naturally unites us,” she says, “but it is also about the way it makes you feel, the way you meet people doing it you might not otherwise meet. It’s a beautiful thing, learning about other people. When I started photographing fighters, I wanted people to see that people like me – and the people I photographed – existed and I’m still a bit driven by that.

“How might what I create function for the young person who will eventually stand in front of it? What would they learn? What might they come away with? I don’t want them to think they don’t belong either. If more people could see each other beyond the labels put on us, I think the barriers would come away. I think art can do that. I genuinely do.”

Only Human: Aneesa Dawoojee is at RPS Gallery, Bristol, 16 September-19 November. rps.org/onlyhuman