

EXHIBITION GUIDE

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MAHTAB HUSSAIN WHAT DID YOU WANT TO SEE?

20 MARCH – 1 JUNE 2025
SECOND FLOOR GALLERIES

Ikon and Photoworks present *What Did You Want to See?*, a solo exhibition of new works by British artist Mahtab Hussain spanning photography, video, text and installation.

Through long-term, multimedia research, Hussain examines the complex relationship between identity, heritage and displacement, challenging prevailing notions of multiculturalism.

In this exhibition, Hussain—who grew up in Birmingham—explores the fine line between photographic documentation and surveillance culture. Through various works, he intervenes in the systems established by the media and the state to monitor inner city neighbourhoods and the Muslim community in Britain.

From 2023 to 2025, Hussain systematically photographed 160 of the city's mosques. The installation ***Mosque City: Birmingham's Spiritual Landscape [2]***, displayed in a 16 × 10 grid, presents an architectural typology reminiscent of works by German artists Hilla and Bernd Becher, that highlights the diversity of mosque architecture. The format of the work addresses Birmingham's history with Project Champion,

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a counter-terrorism surveillance initiative which disproportionately targeted Muslim-majority areas. An adjacent map reveals the project's distribution of surveillance cameras, CCTV and automatic number plate recognition (ANPR) technology. Works such as *Car drivers were monitored via ANPR Cameras (2010)* [4], *CCTV Camera (2024)* [5] and *MA05 TAB (2025)* [11] respond to this scheme. The installation resists the lens of suspicion on mosques and highlights their importance as spaces of belonging, echoed in *A Moment Of Unity: Eid Prayer at Small Heath Park, Birmingham (2017)* [3].

In contrast to the use of photographic typology—an approach often associated with objectivity—*Neighbourhood Watch (2025)* [6] is a carefully staged image of an intergenerational British Pakistani family at a moment of revelation. A teenage boy watches from his bedroom window as his mother steps out of the car, her sister and husband nearby. The bright headlights of the car cut through the misty night creating an atmosphere thick with tension, evoking a community under constant observation.

In *Here is the Brick (2025)* [7] Hussain and his collaborator Guy Gunaratne interweave footage sampled from television, films, newscasts, sporting events and Internet videos with their own documented imagery. This film addresses the racial subjectivity experienced by first and second generation Asian immigrants, critiquing representation in its myriad forms.

An Act of Civil Declaration (2025) [8] is Hussain's response to the ongoing misrepresentation of his community. This series of statements serves as a rejection of the vilifying labels placed on Muslim communities by political rhetoric and media sensationalism. With the final statement—"I AM MUSLIM"—Hussain reclaims his right to dignity and self-definition.

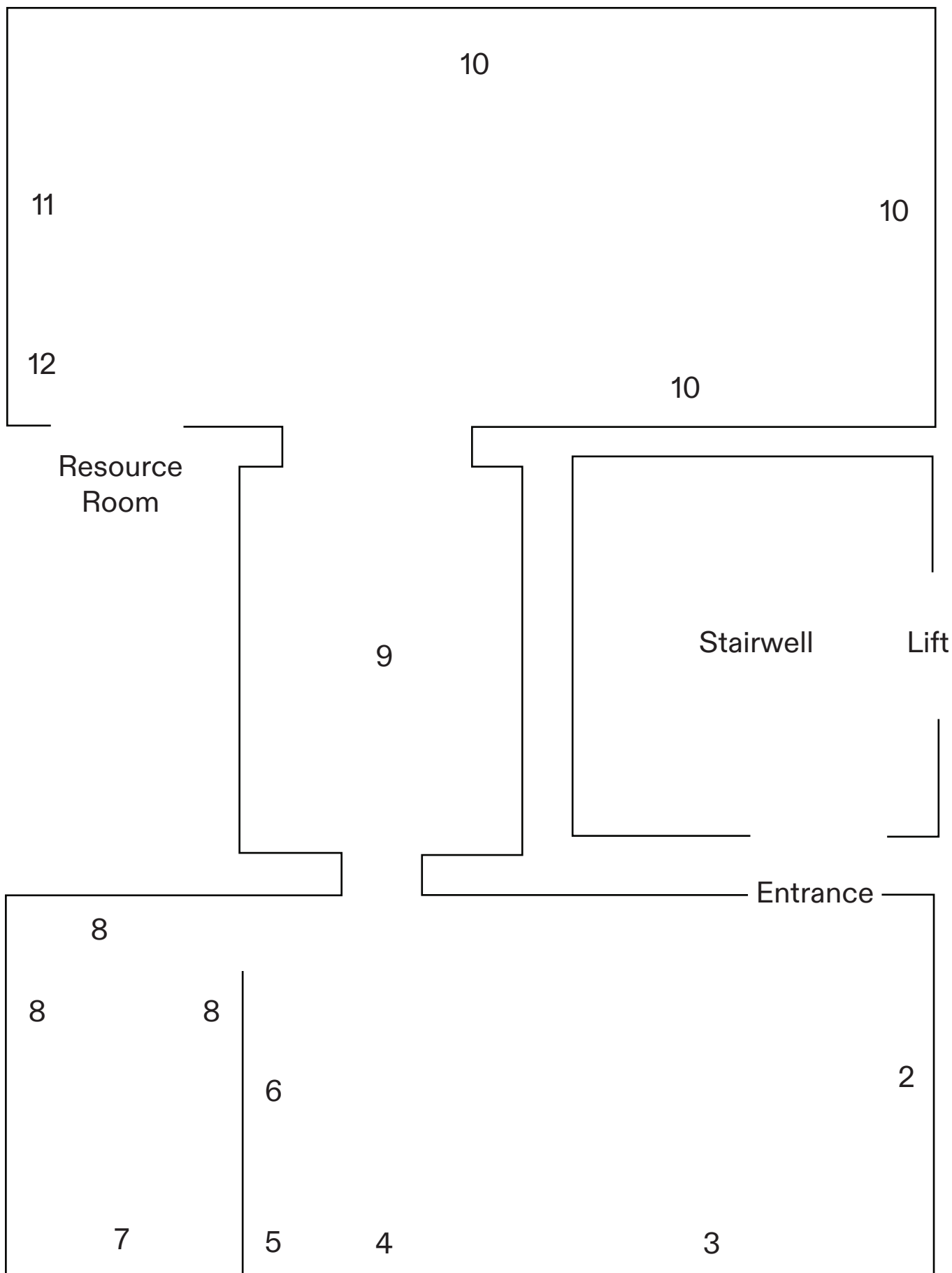
The exhibition progresses with a home-style prayer room, offering a space for communal gathering. The embedded film

Allahu Akbar (2025) [9] follows a man as he performs the five daily prayers (Salah), the cornerstone of Islamic worship. The film presents the phrase “Allahu Akbar” in context: a declaration of faith, a moment of peace and an intimate conversation between a believer and God.

Placed close together are a **series of black-and-white portraits of Birmingham’s South Asian Muslim community (2024-)** [10], inspired by American fashion and portrait photographer Richard Avedon. With these images, Hussain shifts the gaze from traditional colonial power dynamics to a collaborative process with his sitters. The minimalist white backdrop and high contrast portraits hint to surveillance and standardisation, while confronting viewers with the sitters’ humanity.

Throughout the building, interventions such as **postcode tagging** [1]—a form of graffiti—serve as an act of defiance, signalling belonging, community ties and collective memory. In contrast, a **tarmac patch** [12] shows the visual remnants left behind on pavements after the removal of Project Champion surveillance cameras from streets in Sparkhill and Washwood Heath in 2011—reminders of a contentious chapter in urban governance, bearing the memory of tension between security and freedom, community resilience and vigilance.

GALLERY MAP



1. You can find *B11 with Devil Fork* (2013), *B12 Pink Gate* (2013) and *B6 Moon and Star* (2013) throughout the building.

LIST OF WORKS

1. *B11 with Devil Fork* (2013), *B12 Pink Gate* (2013) and *B6 Moon and Star* (2013), digital print on vinyl wallpaper

2. *Mosque City: Birmingham's Spiritual Landscape* (2023-25), digital C-Type prints

3. *A Moment Of Unity: Eid Prayer at Small Heath Park, Birmingham* (2017), digital C-Type print

4. *Car drivers were monitored via ANPR Cameras* (2010), digital C-Type print

5. *CCTV Camera* (2024), CCTV camera

6. *Neighbourhood Watched* (2025), digital C-Type print

7. *Here is the Brick* (2025), video, colour, sound, 13:39 minutes

8. *An Act of Civil Declaration* (2025), acrylic on canvas

9. *Allahu Akbar* (2025), video, colour, sound, 35:50 minutes

10. *Birmingham Chapter series* (2024-), digital C-Type prints: *Romeela, Noora, Ardalan, Dunya, Zahid and Mahmood, Aftab, Honor, Imtiaz, Shazana and Kaniz, Saleem, Adam, Shahisata, Asif, Mohammed, Tasleem, Aqeel, Daddy Shaf, Ifrah, Barkat*

11. *MA05 TAB* (2025), acrylic

12. *Tarmac Patch 2* (2013), digital print on vinyl

All works courtesy the artist

EXHIBITION SUPPORTERS

This exhibition is supported by the John Feeney Charitable Trust and Freelands Foundation.

FREE DIGITAL GUIDE

Discover more about the exhibition with our free digital guide on Bloomberg Connects, the arts and culture app.



EVENTS

Iftar with Mahtab Hussain
Saturday 29 March, 6-8pm
Free, booking essential

In Conversation with Mahtab Hussain and Guy Gunaratne
Wednesday 30 April, 6-7pm
Tickets £3, booking essential

Exhibition Tour with Danit Ariel, Photoworks Curator
Friday 30 May, 3-4pm
Free, booking essential

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