



Title

Jerwood/FVU Awards 2020: Hindsight

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Jerwood/FVU Awards 2020: Hindsight

by Kathryn Lloyd • 19.11.2020

In 1991 the psychologists Dorothee Dietrich and Matthew Olson asked a selection of university students to predict how the United States Senate would vote on the Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas. On the day prior to the vote, fifty-eight per cent of the group anticipated that he would be confirmed. One month later, after Thomas had taken his seat, Dietrich and Olson conducted another survey.¹ When asked to recall the prediction they had previously supplied, the number of students who voted for Thomas's confirmation increased by twenty per cent.

This tendency to overestimate our own ability in predicting an outcome once it has happened is referred to as hindsight bias. Applications of this psychological phenomenon can range from the everyday – exam results, football match scores, a change in weather – to monumental, global events, demonstrated by the criticisms lobbied at the United States government following the September 11th attacks in 2001 for missing 'obvious' warning signs.² Hindsight bias is not only indicative of a refusal to accept our own failures, it also points towards an attempted eradication of the messiness and potential misstep of ignorance. In (re)crafting these narratives, we reject the disjunct between 'before' and 'after', instead replacing it with the idea that we 'knew all along'. As such, we create myths that settle our own personal order of certainty and experience. Hindsight is often framed as a productive tool – a way to fuse the past and present in order to inform the future – but perhaps this bias also demonstrates a human need to separate oneself from one's own history.

Since 2012 Jerwood Arts has partnered with Film and Video Umbrella, London (FVU), to commission two major moving image works annually by artists in the first five years of their practice.³ For the 2020 iteration of the Jerwood/FVU Awards, artists were invited to respond to the theme of hindsight, taking as a starting point Billy Wilder's platitude that 'Hindsight is always 20/20'.⁴ Set out at the beginning of 2019, the theme was proposed for the 'start of a new decade, hoping to free itself from the shadow of recent turbulence and austerity, acknowledging past lessons (or mistakes) in pursuit of new alternatives'.⁵ Over one year later, the two resulting commissions by the artists Guy Oliver (b.1982) and Reman Sadani (b.1995) were installed in Jerwood's London gallery space before the recent lockdown measures resulted in the exhibition's closure. Now, for the first time in the history of the

awards, the commissions are available in full online. Responding to the complex theme of hindsight, both videos manifest their ideas in drastically contrasting ways.

Guy Oliver's *You Know Nothing of my Work* (2020) is a multi-chapter musical that ruminates on the 'cultural dilemma' of the disgraced popular icon. Throughout the thirty-three-minute film, Oliver adopts the role of various male archetypes, each more infuriating than the last. As affable charity shop collector **FIG.1**, self-satisfied presenter **FIG.2**, betrayed superfan and obnoxious lecturer **FIG.3**, he delivers conflicting and conflicted thoughts on such figures as Woody Allen, Michael Jackson, Rolf Harris and Kevin Spacey **FIG.4**. In his performed guises, Oliver considers the dislocation between an enjoyment of their work and what we now know about their abusive behaviour. Using rhyming couplets and what is politely referred to in the work description as a 'faltering baritone', he stumbles across a Lost Prophets CD in a charity shop, discusses the legacy of Bill Cosby with the African American commentator T1J and nervously pronounces that yes, he would dance to Michael Jackson's *Billie Jean* if it was played in a club.



Fig. 1 Still from *You Know Nothing of My Work*, by Guy Oliver. 2020. Video, duration 33 minutes 2 seconds. (Courtesy Film and Video Umbrella, London).

Within the musical framework Oliver has created, his unapologetically tuneless voice is countered by those he surrounds himself with. The mounting self-indulgence of his characters culminates in the Lecturer, who, to a chorus of disgusted spectators, laments the 'downfall' of Woody Allen and what it means for his own cultural tastes. As he espouses clumsy but familiar excuses for the continued support of the work of sexual abusers, Rebecca Lucy Taylor (aka Self Esteem) raises the unavoidable: 'Has it ever occurred that you might not be the best-suited / To be the one who tells us all about what you have concluded / The focus of your project seems to be about yourself / And whether you should still have that Morrissey book on your shelf' **FIG.5**. Taylor's voice cuts through Oliver's with a weary

monologue about the emotional labour that society relentlessly inflicts on victims rather than their perpetrators. We press hardest on those who have suffered most, only for conversations to circulate around the uncomfortable legacy of their abuser's work rather than their crimes.

By necessity, Oliver's film is as problematic as the subjects it mines – as controversial and slippery. It is of course a privilege to examine the impact of abuse, racism and sexual violence as a cultural anxiety in place of a personal one that dictates your daily life. Through their varying forms of analysis and denial, the characters in Oliver's film remove the specificity of abuse, replacing it with the collectivity of cultural consciousness. For those who 'always knew' about Jimmy Savile and Rolf Harris, does hindsight bias alleviate one's own guilt or exacerbate it? As spectators, consumers, admirers, even dissenters, we cannot bridge the chasm between 'before' and 'after'. As Oliver asks: 'What the hell are we supposed to be feeling / What the hell are we supposed to think?'.

As self-aware and complex as Oliver's work is, it can never fully escape the problems inherent within it. In her essay commissioned in response to the film, the artist Louise Ashcroft begins by asking: 'Why am I wasting more time thinking and writing about these monstrous males when I could spend that time platforming the millions of exceptional artists that the patriarchal canon has been too narrow for?'.⁶ In attempting to answer her own question, she resorts to a dialogue between two internally conflicting voices: 'Me 1' versus 'Me 2'. Together, they battle with ideas around male guilt, catharsis, self-indulgence, hypocrisy and the hijacking of the #MeToo movement for artistic gain. Her conclusion – something that Oliver resolutely avoids in his film – is to ask: should we not support his meaningful effort to raise 'difficult questions and face inevitable backlash?'.



Fig. 2 Still from *You Know Nothing of My Work*, by Guy Oliver. 2020. Video, duration 33 minutes 2 seconds. (Courtesy Film and Video Umbrella, London).

Unlike Oliver's discordant musical, Sadani's twenty-one-minute film *Walkout 1* (2020) is rooted in a linear narrative. It begins in the aftermath of a dust storm that has erupted in a desert and arrived in an unnamed city. Unable to settle, sand stays suspended in the air, causing a pervasive, orange miasma of dust. Standing on the flat roof of a building, four young people lasso long nets around their heads, as though signalling to the sky FIG.6. In fact, they are removing particles from the air, collecting them in order to fulfil the Elder's prophecy that youths will walk into the sky to clear it. Working with an older female instructor, played by the artist Maryam Hashemi, they build sand dunes to offer to the sky, so that it will reveal its route FIG.7 FIG.8.

Sand is both a constructive and destructive force in Sadani's microcosm: it affects their senses, blocks their vision, hangs on to their clothing FIG.9, falls unexpectedly when they are trying to build, yet is assigned the role of helping them find an exit – both from the city and their current situation. As a material, sand refuses human mark-making; it holds no impressions and its movement is dictated by external forces. But here, community is forged around its presence and potential. The absurdity of their tasks – sweeping sand from the sky, building offerings to fulfil a nebulous prophecy – is indicative of Sadani's interpretation of the hindsight theme. Setting up a divide between those who cling to an ideology and those who are assigned the task of following it, she explores the mutable conditions of shared crisis, which limit reflection and articulation, encouraging only some form of (blind) progress; the present moment can never carry within it what we learn in hindsight. As one youth remarks: 'We forgot to mark what appeared and what disappeared. We all forgot to measure our loss'.



Fig. 3 Still from *You Know Nothing of My Work*, by Guy Oliver. 2020. Video, duration 33 minutes 2 seconds. (Courtesy Film and Video Umbrella, London).

In the midst of the haze, the youths are caught between retrieving

the city's history and forging a new future, between the instruction of the Elders and their own agency. Sadani's imagined cityscape draws on her own experiences growing up in Arab countries before moving to the United Kingdom, as well as discussions with contributors concerning flawed systems of authority and collective frustrations. As her young characters move the sand with their hands, they talk about intention and rebellion. For one, the offerings are meaningless when measured in terms of action but meaningful in retaining community: 'None of us want the sky to listen. I like this dust, it's the only thing I recognise'. But one by one, they move backwards out of the frame, until Hashemi's character is left alone on screen.



Fig. 4 Still from *You Know Nothing of My Work*, by Guy Oliver. 2020. Video, duration 33 minutes 2 seconds. (Courtesy Film and Video Umbrella, London).

In principle, hindsight can teach us where we have failed, or what we have failed to notice. But what these two works also show – in their distinctly different ways – is that even when we learn, we lie, we reformulate and rewrite history in order to orientate ourselves within it. As our knowledge and experience amasses, so too does our inclination for refuting it. Perhaps now our bias is a mode of self-protection: if we knew it all along, then we only have others to blame.



Fig. 5 Still from *You Know Nothing of My Work*, by Guy Oliver. Commissioned for the Jerwood/FVU Awards 2020. Duration 33 minutes 02 seconds. (Courtesy Film and Video Umbrella (FVU), London).



Fig. 6 Still from *Walkout 1*, by Reman Sadani. 2020. Video, duration 21 minutes 34 seconds. (Courtesy Film and Video Umbrella, London).



Fig. 7 Still from *Walkout 1*, by Reman Sadani. 2020. Video, duration 21 minutes 34 seconds. (Courtesy Film and Video Umbrella, London).



Fig. 8 Still from *Walkout 1*, by Reman Sadani. 2020. Video, duration 21 minutes 34 seconds. (Courtesy Film and Video Umbrella, London).



Fig. 9 Still from *Walkout 1*, by Reman Sadani. 2020. Video, duration 21 minutes 34 seconds. (Courtesy Film and Video Umbrella, London).

Exhibition details

Jerwood/FVU Awards 2020: Hindsight

www.jerwoodfvuawards.com

29th October–13th December 2020

Footnotes

- 1 During Thomas's confirmation process allegations of sexual assault against him by the lawyer Anita Hill were leaked to the media. Hill was called to testify and subjected to a gruelling cross-examination from an all-white, all-male Senate Judiciary Committee.
- 2 M. Inman: 'Hindsight bias', *Encyclopaedia Britannica Online*, www.britannica.com/topic/hindsight-bias, accessed 19th November 2020.
- 3 The Jerwood/FVU Awards are a collaboration between Jerwood Arts and Film and Video Umbrella. FVU is supported using public funding by the National Lottery through Arts Council England.
- 4 Billy Wilder, quoted in S. Bode: 'Introduction: Jerwood/FVU Awards 2020', available at www.jerwoodfvuawards.com/resources/Hindsight_essays_SB_FINAL.pdf, accessed 19th November 2020.
- 5 See 'Jerwood/FVU Awards Brief', available at www.jerwoodfvuawards.com/about-us/awards-editions/hindsight, accessed 19th November 2020.
- 6 L. Ashcroft: 'Jerwood/FVU Awards 2020: Hindsight. Guy Oliver', available at www.jerwoodfvuawards.com/resources/Hindsight_essays_LA_FINAL.pdf, accessed 19th November 2020.

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