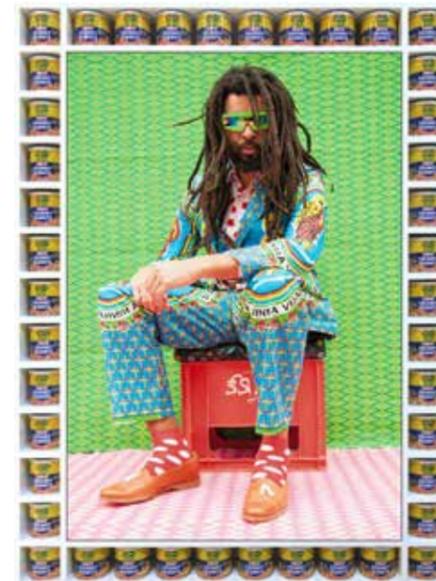


# Hassan Hajjaj

## The Path

MAIN & MEZZANINE GALLERY  
6 APRIL - 23 JUNE 2019



Hassan Hajjaj, My Rockstars series, Marc Hare, 2013

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### SPECIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Both Ekow Eshun, the curator, and Hassan Hajjaj, the artist, are iconic symbols of hope and inspiration for people of colour, also wider society. They synchronise in so many ways complementing one another's life and professional interests bringing exuberance and energy into our lives. Ekow and Hassan, in what they share, offer an explosion of colour that refracts in a multitude of ways - sharing the brilliance of distinct aesthetics and narratives that must be heard. At NAE supporting such narratives and creative expression is at the heart of our practice and programme, where we awaken what is absent in the everyday systems of life. So the arrival and proliferation of ideas and art forms from great artists and creative instigators, connects us as communities, often marginalised and alienated from contemporary art spaces, so we feel alive again and connected to one another.

**Skinder Hundal**  
Director/CEO New Art Exchange



Hassan Hajjaj, My Rockstars series, Bumi Sittini, 2013

**EE: Tell us about the exhibition title, *The Path*?**

HH: It comes originally from an album of the same name by the jazz funk artist Ralph MacDonald. We had a conversation and you suggested using the title from a record and I was so happy. For years I wanted to use the name and to be able to create a show with that title. The work in this show is really a journey, it's telling the story of the people back at home in Morocco and then it goes into *My Rock Stars*. So really it's just a perfect title for the show.

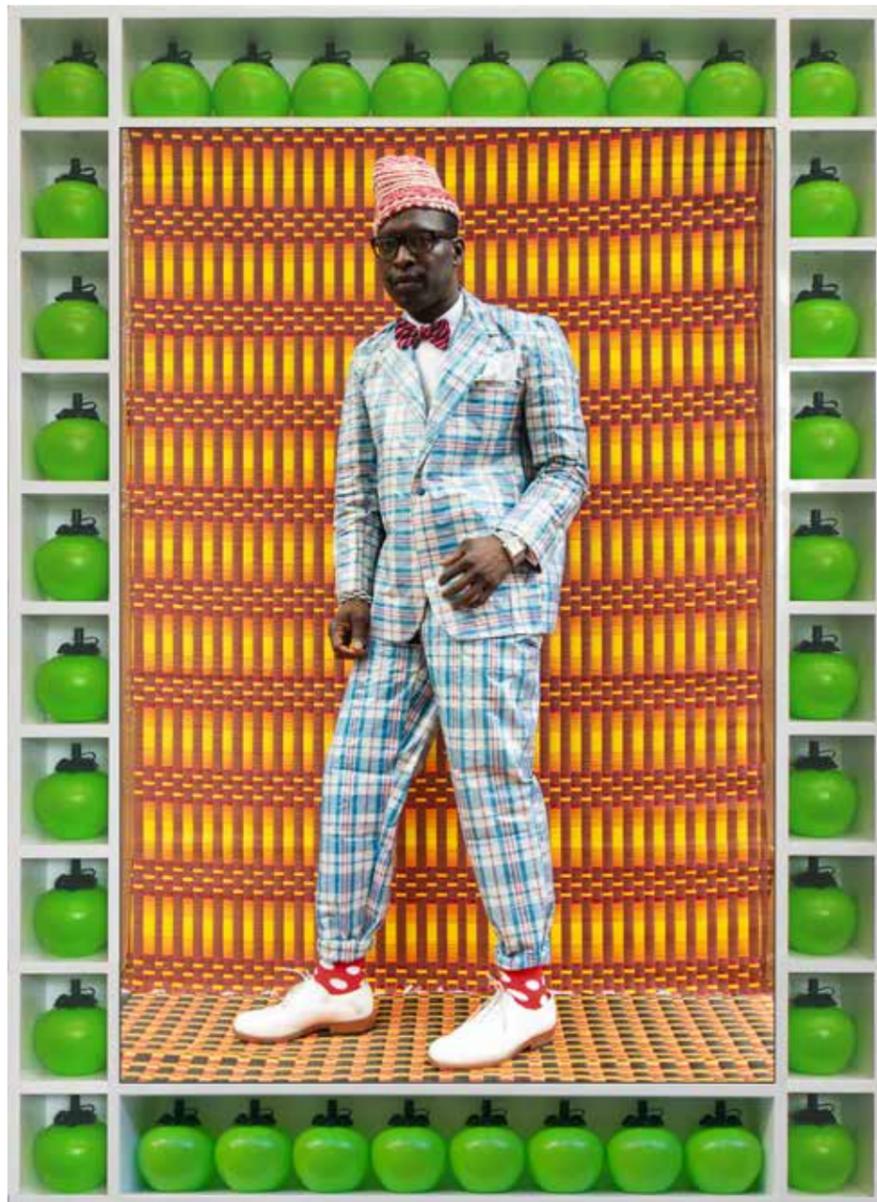
◀ *Continues from overleaf*

**EE: So this is a kind of portrait of Britain.**

HH: In a sense, yes, definitely. People like myself, like yourself, who are born here or came here or are maybe second or third generation, we're part of this country. It's about trying to tell a story. Hopefully people who can come to the show can see themselves in the work.

**EE: There's potentially a lot to be frustrated or angry about when it comes to growing up in Britain and thinking about race or cultural identity. But you always seem to capture a very positive sense of people in your portraits.**

The people in the pictures come from all different parts of the world and when you start putting them next to each other, it becomes a positive image. For me as an artist, I'd rather be on the positive side and maybe make the viewer see something positive in themselves than trying to be gloomy. If I have, young people especially, coming up to the work and feeling, 'Oh I can be that person' or 'I can be the person taking that picture', then for me, that's the greatest feeling you can have as an artist. And that's what keeps me doing the work.



Hassan Hajjaj, My Rockstars series, Alexander Niere, 2013

designed by Saria Digregorio



Hassan Hajjaj, My Rockstars series, Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, 2017

## INTRODUCTION

*Hassan Hajjaj: The Path* is a solo exhibition by Moroccan-British photographer Hassan Hajjaj which presents a unique and timely consideration of culture and identity in the modern, globalised world. *The Path* has been curated by Ekow Eshun and produced by NAE.

Born in Morocco, Hajjaj moved to Britain aged 12. He works today between both countries and his photography reflects the perspective of a natural born cosmopolitan who delights at teasing out the connections and contradictions that he discovers on his travels. Hajjaj's photographs are characterised by an exuberant melee of colours, patterns, appropriated brand logos and found objects such as the Sprite cans and tomato soup tins he works into his picture frames. Signs, symbols and people from around the

globe collide without hierarchy or the presumed superiority of a Eurocentric worldview.

The exhibition begins in the Main Gallery with the series *Dakka Marrakchia*. Here women pose like fashion models on the streets and rooftops of Marrakech while dressed in camouflage pattern djellabas and Louis Vuitton print face veils, the portraits offering a deliberate refutation of stereotypes of Islamic women as subjugated and disempowered.

Also in the Main Gallery is Hajjaj's ongoing series *My Rock Stars*, including a video installation and new portraits of friends and creative figures personally or artistically inspirational for Hajjaj. For *The Path* he has focussed primarily on British figures such as the painter Lynette Yiadom-Boakye, jazz musician Kamaal Williams and the shoe designer Marc Hare. His subjects hail from a range of cultural backgrounds creating, in composite, a portrait of Britain at its most dynamically diverse.

In focusing on figures whose family origins mostly lie abroad, Hajjaj conjures a vision of a society united, not divided, by difference. This in contrast to Theresa May's mocking assertion that a citizen of the world is a citizen of nowhere. At a time when Britain risks turning inwards in pursuit of a national identity based on an idealised past, Hajjaj's portraits make an urgent, timely case in favour of hybridity and multiculturalism. In his images, cultural identity is fluid and multiple rather than fixed and singular.\* Inspired by Hajjaj's *My Rock Stars* series and the artist's approach to



Hassan Hajjaj, Beirut Curtains, 2010

celebrating inspiring everyday people, NAE commissioned Hajjaj to produce an additional Nottingham-centric portrait. The sitter was selected via a project called *Everyday Superstars*. Here NAE invited their audiences to nominate extra-special individuals from the city; calling for activists campaigning for social change, supporters of young people, individuals who have accomplished in the face of adversity, or simply amazing talents worthy of recognition. The *Everyday Superstars* winner, who was selected by a panel of young people, was styled and photographed by Hajjaj, and their portrait appears here alongside Hajjaj's other rock stars. The portrait and accompany story of other *Everyday Superstars* nominees are also displayed in NAE's Central Gallery space, photographed this time by local artist, Richard Chung.

Moving upstairs into the Mezzanine Gallery, Hajjaj has transformed the space into *Le Salon* – an immersive site-specific art installation where visitors can not only read, relax and research, but importantly the space is a platform to experience local talent. With its patterned walls and repurposed furniture, *Le Salon* pays reference to traditional living rooms in

Moroccan homes – social spaces for drinking tea and hosting guests. Over the period of the exhibition *Le Salon* is an open space for local performers, musicians and spoken word artists to share their creativity with others.

*Le Salon* also showcases a never exhibited before photo collection by Hajjaj called *Between*, a selection of photography that focusses on landscape, place and sensibility, rather than portraiture. The *Between* images are informal and diaristic, reflecting the artist's travels in Africa and the Middle East. They reveal Hajjaj in a new light, as a photographer concerned with the intimacies of everyday life as well as the performed presentation of the self that takes place in the studio. And here too, Hajjaj shifts the focus away from a narrative that positions the ordinary people of the developing world as extras in the drama of globalisation – as refugees, migrants and dollar-a-day strugglers. In Hajjaj's portraits they are not figures on the margins. They are no less than rock stars in the waiting.

The exhibition title, *The Path* references Hajjaj's personal journey from his birthplace in Larache, Morocco, to London and to working internationally. It also draws inspiration from the album of that title by the jazz-fusion musician Ralph MacDonald, which pays artistic testament to the diasporic scattering of peoples of African descent around the globe.

\* Stuart Hall, *Cultural Identity and Diaspora*



Hassan Hajjaj, Dotted Peace, 2000

## EXHIBITION CURATOR EKOW ESHUN IN CONVERSATION WITH ARTIST HASSAN HAJJAJ

**EE: You were born in Morocco and came to London aged 12. You now work between Morocco and the UK. How does that dual heritage affect your work?**

HH: Majorly. Without one or the other I definitely wouldn't be doing what I'm doing now. Growing up in Morocco meant growing up among the traditions of an Islamic country. And then coming to London and living in one of the most cosmopolitan, most international cities in the world that gave me a different way of looking at myself.

Morocco was always there as a backdrop because you know, when you leave a country you always keep the memories, I suppose even stronger than if you'd lived there. So between these two places it gave me a different way of looking at myself and my work.

**EE: You've created a very distinct aesthetic in your work. How have you developed that style?**

HH: Growing up in London I got involved with music, fashion, art and film. I was watching Yo, MTV Raps and going to reggae gigs, listening to dub, Latin music, Hindi music. This really was an influence. I worked as an assistant stylist. I worked on music videos. I had a fashion shop. And that really came out in the work.

And as for colour, it's probably to do with growing up in Morocco. It's such a colourful place – the clashing colours that people wear, the light. All this was inside me. Living in England, I suppose we live in a film noir, it's quite a grey country. So the photos were a form of escapism for myself. When I set up a shoot, at that moment I'm escaping myself, along with the sitter, into a more colourful world.

**EE: One of the particular approaches in your work is that you shoot from a low angle and you bring this slightly heroic aspect to your subjects. What's behind that?**

HH: This is a combination of a few things. It's definitely coming from growing up watching martial arts movies and Hype Williams hip-hop videos. If you look at Chinese martial arts movies, they like to make people look heroic. And you can look at street photography, especially in hip-hop, there's a lot of shots from ground up. Especially when I do exterior shoots, I always try to do something cinematic so it feels like there's a story there. In formal studio shoots people use quite clean, clear shots. I just wanted to make my figures even bigger than they are so the viewer goes to see the work they're looking up at them and the subject is looking down, creating this big character that's almost king-like.

**EE: What's the genesis of the *My Rock Stars* series? Where did it come from initially as an idea?**

HH: I always remember the cover of Vanity Fair with Liam Gallagher and Patsy Kensit [March 1997], lying in bed

with a Union Jack bed cover. It was the time of Cool Britannia, Tony Blair had just come in, you had Oasis and Blur. And that really hurt me. I was like, what about us? My friends, people like me. There are so many talented people who aren't given the opportunity to go mainstream. Where are we? We're not getting a look in.

So this is when I felt, I've got these incredible people that are really striving to do things, not just in London, in Paris, Morocco, Brazil. Let me capture them. So really it started from there and just grew. And as I was shooting I thought, there's this other person and this other person. It just continued. And I thought, look at people like Malick Sidibé who shot sitters in their city and documented their people. I thought, I'm that new generation who can capture their friends, who can capture Keziah Jones in Paris or a capoeira master from Brazil. It's not just about taking a pretty picture. It's my job to really document the situation and try to make an army of these people.

**EE: And how did you decide on the selection of people you've chosen for this exhibition?**

HH: With what's going on with Brexit and what's happening beyond England, in Europe and in America with Trump, this felt like a really good moment to do this. I'm not a political artist but I wanted to use this exhibition to try to tell a story capturing all these people to say, we're part of here as well.

