

MAHTAB HUSSAIN

WHAT DID YOU WANT TO SEE?

20 MARCH – 1 JUNE 2025



Mahtab Hussain, *Faizal Islam Masjid, Birmingham* (2024).
From the series *What Did You Want To See?* (2024). Courtesy Mahtab Hussain.

Ikon presents a solo exhibition, *What Did You Want To See?* by British artist Mahtab Hussain (20 March – 1 June 2025). Hussain explores the fine line between photographic documentation and surveillance culture, addressing the intelligence sites established by the media and the state to monitor the Muslim community in Britain.

Commissioned by Ikon and Photoworks, the exhibition features new work, including Hussain's systematic documentation of 160 Birmingham mosques, revealing the diversity of mosque architecture; portraits of Birmingham residents which highlight the city's vibrant Muslim community; a communal space within the gallery aimed at fostering inclusion and intercultural dialogue; and *What Did You Want To See?* an installation simulating a site under surveillance.

During the summers of 2023 and 2024, Hussain, who was raised in Birmingham, systematically photographed the city's mosques, capturing 160 in total. Displayed in a 16 x 10 grid, the installation offers an architectural typology reminiscent of works by German artists Hilla and Bernd Becher. The collection reveals the diversity of mosque architecture, from the iconic domes and minarets of Birmingham's Central Mosque to the Arts & Crafts designs of terraced houses and yellow brick churches. Each photograph stands unique, resisting singular interpretation and analysis. Collectively, they underscore the pervasive act of data collection and classification.

Following his previous photographic series *You Get Me?* (2008-2017) and *Honest With You* (2008-2018), which visualised the experiences of British South Asian men and women, Hussain's latest work presents portraits of Birmingham residents. Produced in 2024, these black and white portraits highlight the vibrant diversity of Birmingham's Muslim community. The individuals in the portraits gaze back — one individual is formally dressed in traditional clothing, while another is pictured in his car mechanic's attire. A further portrait shows a woman holding a cigarette, her elbow propped up by her other hand, while she stares ahead; another depicts a daughter with her arms around her elderly mother, the patterns and texture of their outfits expressive even in monochrome. Hussain's lens captures the intersectionality of his subjects, embracing their individuality and avoiding stereotypical representations.

Hussain's installations create a communal space within the gallery, fostering inclusion, care and intercultural dialogue. A carpeted room features a video of five prayer sequences, inviting visitors to join or observe as they choose. Another installation, titled *An Act of Civil Declaration* (2025), is a series of statements that confront the harmful stereotypes and prejudiced labels that the Muslim community has faced.

Two additional videos, created in collaboration with novelist, playwright and video artist Guy Gunaratne, explore the Muslim experience in Britain. They celebrate community activities, sports and social gatherings while also reflecting on Hussain's personal journey growing up in Birmingham. Another video features actor, poet and playwright Azan Ahmed sharing the act of daily prayer and its meaning. These installations highlight the richness of the British Muslim community's heritage and the artist's intimate connection to his hometown.

Throughout the building, interventions such as post code tagging — a form of graffiti — serve as an act of defiance, transforming the walls into a shared map, signalling belonging, community ties and collective memory. In contrast, the gradual removal of Project Champion surveillance cameras from Birmingham's streets in 2011 left behind visual remnants in the form of strange tarmac patches dotting the pavements. Repurposed in Ikon Gallery, the patches are reminders and witnesses to a contentious chapter in urban governance, bearing the memory of tension between security and freedom, and a reminder of community resilience and vigilance.

"Through my work, I strive to reflect the richness and resilience of Muslim communities, celebrating their individuality while challenging stereotypes. Each portrait and installation is a story, an invitation to connect, and a reminder of the beauty in our shared humanity." Mahtab Hussain

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

For more information, press appointments, high-res images and to request interviews please contact Rebecca Small by email r.small@ikon-gallery.org or call Ikon on 0121 248 0708. For Photoworks, please contact Studio Nicola Jeffs on +44 7794694754 or email Nj@nicolajeffs.com

Social Media: @mahthussain @ikongallery #IkonGallery @photoworks_uk @ace_national @aceagrams @ace_midlands @bhamcitycouncil

Notes to Editors:

1. **Mahtab Hussain** was born in Scotland in 1981 and raised in Birmingham. He received his BA in History of Art at Goldsmiths College, London, specialising in Fine Art Photography; his MA in Museum and Gallery Management, City University, London; was awarded an Arts Humanities Research Council (AHRC), and completed his MA in Photography at Nottingham Trent University. Hussain has been the recipient of numerous awards and commissions including Ikon, New Art Exchange, Arts Council England and Arts Humanities Research Council and has published four artist books. His themes develop through long-term research articulating a visual language that challenges the prevailing concepts of multiculturalism. mahtabhussain.com
2. **Ikon** is an internationally acclaimed contemporary art gallery, situated in Birmingham's city centre. Established in 1964 by a group of artists, Ikon celebrates its 60th anniversary in 2024. It is an educational charity with free entry for all, and works to encourage public engagement with contemporary art through exhibiting new work in a context of debate and participation. The gallery programme features artists from around the world and a variety of media is represented, including sound, film, mixed media, photography, painting, sculpture and installation. Ikon's off-site programme develops dynamic relationships between art, artists and audiences outside the gallery. Projects vary enormously in scale, duration and location, challenging expectations of where art can be seen and by whom. Education is at the heart of Ikon's activities, stimulating public interest in and understanding of contemporary visual art. Ikon aims to build dynamic relationships with audiences, enabling visitors to engage with, discuss and reflect on contemporary art. ikon-gallery.org
3. **Ikon** is open Tuesday – Sunday and Bank Holiday Mondays, 11am-5pm. Free entry, donations welcome. Ikon is supported using public funding by the National Lottery through Arts Council England, and Birmingham City Council.
4. **Photoworks** champions photography for everyone. We are an international platform, global in reach, and have provided opportunities for artists and audiences since 1995. Our programme brings new experiences to audiences and opens up new ways to encounter photography including the Photoworks Festival (next festival 2026). Photoworks is a registered charity and the only organisation with a national remit for photography in England. Our work is supported by public funding through Arts Council England's National Portfolio. In 2025 Photoworks celebrates its 30th anniversary. photoworks.org.uk
5. **Arts Council England** is the national development agency for creativity and culture. ACE have set out their strategic vision in *Let's Create* that by 2030 they want England to be a country in which the creativity of each of us is valued and given the chance to flourish and where everyone of us has access to a remarkable range of high-quality cultural experiences. From 2023 to 2026 ACE will invest over £467 million of public money from Government and an estimated £250 million from The National Lottery each year to help support the sector and to deliver this vision. artscouncil.org.uk
6. **Birmingham City Council** is the local government body responsible for the governance of the City of Birmingham, UK. It is the most populated local council area in the United Kingdom (excluding counties) with 101 elected councillors representing over one million people, in 69 wards. The council headquarters are at the Council House, Victoria Square in the heart of the city centre. The council is responsible for running nearly all local services, with the exception of those run by joint boards. For more information visit birmingham.gov.uk