

Kenya Fried Chicken

This photograph originally appeared in my series *Afropean* and is included though badly printed in the *Afropean* book. It's one of the earliest photographs included in the exhibition, and it's my part of Sheffield during the winter months. And what I always notice about my part of Sheffield is that there's this kind of thick fog that sometimes shrouds the streets. And this photograph is one of dozens I've taken in Firth Park fog over the years and always evokes a story my mum told to me about my granddad who died when she was 12. He'd just returned from the Second World War after fighting behind enemy lines in Burma and was back working in a steel factory. After finishing work one day, the fog was so bad that he couldn't find his way home, so he just sat down on a bench and burst into tears.

I wonder, did the fog also symbolise a feeling of being lost in life for him? It does for me. From the vantage point of 2022, perhaps this image chimes with the Black Lives Matter moment or the unpeopled streets we became so accustomed to during the Coronavirus lockdowns, but I actually see it as a relic from the rubble of Tony Blair's Britain. It was taken just three months before New Labour lost the 2010 general election to the Tories. What began as an optimistic forward-thinking vision for this country had slowly soured following 9/11, the ensuing wars on terror and in Iraq and the global financial crisis when it turned out that unfettered free market globalisation couldn't solve all our problems.

David Blunkett, New Labor's home secretary and MP for Firth Park's constituency at the time said in 2002 that local schools were being swamped by asylum seekers. And he was talking specifically about some of my friends when he said that; kids not creatures from a swamp.

I have a certain ambivalence about the changes I witnessed in Sheffield during the Blair years, a labour stronghold there's no doubt that money

was pumped into the city - terms like investment in people and cultural industries were popularised. A trend carried on from the Thatcher / Major years. The steel industry that had employed much of my family was supplanted by the leisure industry. Some of these changes were captured in the recent brilliant exhibition on show at Weston Park *Sheffield Regeneration, the Sheffield Project* and the landscape of my childhood, those civic spaces containing the unofficial pulse of Black life in the city were razed. From my secondary school to my youth club, the estate that housed my lifelong barbers, to the club where my mum and dad met, to my first place of work and the first place I ever kissed a girl; it was all gone by the end of the 2000s.

It started to occur to me that spaces in which Black and working-class communities are sustained are often ephemeral.

Unless something catastrophic happens, my great grandkids will surely be able to contemplate the same Buckingham Palace and all it suggests as I can now, whereas all the historical tracers in my community will have vanished.

Photography then kind of became an attempt to preserve these vulnerable cultural artefacts and I set out obsessively chronicling in these things that I considered a part of our collective psychic geography, that genal at the side of a Netto supermarket, this piece of fading graffiti by a recently deceased artist. And yes, the Kenya Fried Chicken long since gone, it's Kenyan-Indian owner, now dead, a local amenity for kids in the nineties because it housed a Street Fighter 2 arcade console.

By the end of the 2000s, my spluttering career in television was in a similar state to New Labour. I'd been welcomed into the world of entertainment, but came up against endless glass ceilings when I tried to

develop a serious career in a classist, racist country; an industry cloaked in a veneer of inclusion. Forced out of a London where rent and house prices had ballooned at the time I was back living in my mum's terraced house.

But it was in those uncertain days that I would piece together an aesthetic and a plan that would ultimately result in my book, *Afropean: Notes from Black Europe* to which this photo belongs. And also *Home is Not a Place*. The goal was to find a way to preserve and be proud of Firth Park while acknowledging its sometimes crushing parochialism by connecting with other such areas around Britain and around Europe. Other demonised, multicultural working-class enclaves constantly in danger of being under or misrepresented.

These days I do most of my work in colour, and in some ways this photo strikes me as a tad naïve now. I've never been romantic about where I'm from, but back then I was really interested in trying to elevate my local neighbourhood and make it look as cinematic as possible, trying to capture something both honest and beautiful, which is why I'm still quite proud of this image.

It was the first in my *Afropean* series and serves as a document of my area, an ode to my granddad in a portrait of my own interior landscape at that time. The camera was set on a timer. That figure in the distance is me as a young man heading out into the dark, trying to find my way in the world.