

## Desperate Journeys

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Recently I had the privilege of joining a team in Europe engaged in revising the visual arts component of an international exam qualification. I enjoyed discussing progressive ideas about education that foregrounded creativity and imagination in a context of students' wellbeing. I found this refreshing, not least for being in Europe and away from the poisonous Brexit debate that has engulfed the UK, which is underpinned by strong xenophobia manifest in anti-immigration and anti-refugee policies and attitudes. This climate makes it very difficult for state funded schools and colleges to maintain a progressive or international outlook in shaping their curriculum. The foundational principal of a common education, with equal educational opportunities for all, irrespective of nationality or race, is increasingly absent from education policymaking, replaced with more instrumental, myopic and nationalistic concerns. It is no coincidence that in England particularly the arts have been increasingly excluded and underfunded (NSEAD 2017), since they flourish in more progressive establishments where the opportunity to participate in the arts is much greater. Within such an educational climate the idea of a common education for all is correspondingly diminished; as Caroline Benn and Brian Simon observed:

*That everyone could be equally well educated was – and remains – a revolutionary idea. For this reason, common education has always been opposed by conservatives and elitists who fear it will lead to changes in class and productive relations in favour of new social groups. (1976, 42)*

Benn and Simon's observation seems even more pertinent today. Thinking of perhaps the greatest human problem of our age – inequality, and the refugee crises it produces – it would seem to me that a critical education assumes a more significant role than ever. The astonishing levels of seemingly wilful ignorance displayed by anti-immigration groups have contaminated discussions about Europe in the UK and encouraged the pernicious deceptions of the conservative press and media.

Recently when encountering Paul Dash's new artwork, and thinking of his own torrid educational journey through his secondary modern school in the 1950s as a young Caribbean immigrant in Oxford, I was reminded of the unique potential for art

education to act as a critical bulwark against the popular mythologies that only serve the interests of the privileged and the status quo. I reread Dash's autobiography *Foreday Morning* (2002) in which he documents his experiences as a young Caribbean immigrant to the UK, attempting to settle into his school, and the trials that he experienced through the endemic racism of that period. His discovery of his ability as an artist through the opportunities provided for him in school art classes was one of the few redeeming features of his school life:

*I began to look forward to Friday afternoons in the art room with greater and greater excitement. I couldn't wait to get in there and settle into work. The smell of powder paint was as sweet as anything in God's creation, the clink of brushes in water jars harbouring years of deep pleasure. (2002, 42)*

This enthusiasm for painting has continued unabated through Dash's life, and his current series of works entitled 'Boat Refugee Pieces' (2018, 2019) depicts with great aesthetic verve the humanitarian disaster that occurs daily in the Mediterranean, the desperate knocking of the poor world on the rich world's European door. As Dash explains:

*These pieces were inspired by the sad events in the Mediterranean driven by different catastrophes, that have claimed the lives of thousands of decent human beings and displaced tens of thousands of others. Whilst inspired specifically by the Mediterranean disaster, however, it takes account of refugee crises everywhere and should be seen as a tribute to all people caught up in such awful tragedies. (2019)*



**Figure 1.** *Drifting Without Power* (2017) by Paul Dash. Mixed media on paper. Reproduced by courtesy of the artist.

In *Drifting without Power* (Figure 1) Dash depicts with an illustrator's particularity a boat laden with people, yet caught in the hopeless situation of their powerlessness, literally and metaphorically. The small but poignant touches of affection which Dash depicts – that hand round the shoulder of a companion, the cradling of a friend's head – pierce through the aesthetic into the human realm; we cannot indulge so easily in our pleasure at his technical skill or colour harmonies, evident those these are. Dash's concern with the subject dominates, as he says of this work:

*it attempts to depict the cramped, over-crowded conditions in which many boat refugees live, while on water; conditions in which personal space is seriously compromised and the dignity of privacy almost non-existent.*

For me the most moving of Dash's Boat Refugee series are those where the figures are almost obscured by the crosshatching in the drawing, as in *Rescued Night Refugees Rest*. The anonymity is punctuated by a few figures whose outlines are gracefully drawn with sufficient detail to bring home the specificities of identity, and it is hard not to feel a mixture of pity and anger that people should find themselves in such desperate situations. Dash's paintings, however, are meticulously composed and controlled in such a way as to draw us in, emotionally as well as visually. We are not permitted the luxury of detachment, as might be the case with other media, or by artists with a less personal investment in the subject being depicted. Above all,

looking at these paintings, one is convinced that Dash cares about the refugees as much as he cares about painting. Therein lies the power of these works: the technique is at one with the pathos.



**Figure 2.** Detail from *Rescued Night Refugees Rest* (2017) by Paul Dash. Mixed media on paper mounted on card. Reproduced by courtesy of the artist.

Dash does not allow us to forget that his works are a visceral comment on our current state of chronic national and global inequality, that this is happening now, and will go on happening as long as these conditions prevail. The works are no less hard-hitting because of the aesthetically sumptuous surfaces that his busy crosshatching over layers of washes produces. We are drawn in by his adroit technique only to find ourselves made uncomfortable by what emerges, just as these boats with their humanitarian bleakness might emerge from the mists to confront tourists enjoying a dusky Mediterranean sunset. Dash appears to be addressing us not so much as art spectators but as fellow human beings: what could we be doing to help? Or, perhaps more imperatively, what *should* we be doing to help.

Dash, acutely alert to xenophobic and racist trends throughout his life, has chosen a deeply evocative means of presenting the converse, means that resist the indiscriminate othering of the refugee population. The boatloads in his drawings and paintings are unmistakably people, floating parcels of humanity. J. Jason Mitchell (2017), recounting his experiences on an NGO ship in the Mediterranean sent to provide medical assistance to refugees attempting the dangerous crossing from Libya to Italy, offers a poignant account of the anxieties and deprivations suffered by the refugees in their desperate and frequently futile search for safety:

*On the second morning, we brought three men aboard. On water, doctors triaged the sick, unconscious, pregnant and young, moving from raft to raft through the late afternoon. The three men had all inhaled and ingested petrol that had spilled into the water from the fuel line of their outboard motor. In one raft, we left a man cradling the head of another man, already dead for hours. (p.32)*

Perhaps most distressing for Mitchell is his inability to find any form of identification for most of the sick or dead people to whom he has to attend. In the absence of formal identity documentation he looks for clues in objects about their person, even their clothing, searching for some means of enabling him to send word to their family or friends. All too frequently he finds nothing.

In his deeply troubling dystopian novel 'The Wall', John Lanchester (2018) explores the notion of the immigrant 'Other', in a future Britain after catastrophic climate change, and where strategies to prevent immigration by sea are amplified into a full-scale militarised conflict. The 'Defenders' of the island nation state destroy all approaching boats from their sea wall fortifications, killing the 'Others' on sight, disregarding any notion of humanitarianism or empathy. In this not-so-fictional world the concept of the refugee has long since been abandoned in favour of entrenched government-sanctioned xenophobia and nationalism. Lanchester's point seems to be that this horrific scenario is only a step away from some current European and US policies towards immigration, as exemplified by the creation of a 'hostile environment' policy in the UK – amongst the many discriminated against under this repulsive policy were those of the Caribbean 'Windrush' generation, of which Dash was one.



**Figure 3.** *Boat Refugees Head out at Dusk* (2017) by Paul Dash. Mixed media on paper mounted on card. Reproduced by courtesy of the artist.

Like Mitchell, Dash attempts to reinvest humanity into the refugee crises he depicts, albeit through subtle and aesthetic means. Even works that ostensibly contain little material that might distinguish one person from another, such as *Boat Refugees Head out at Dusk* (Figure 3), are nonetheless imbued with a sense of hope pitted against overwhelming odds. In this painting the huddled group, crammed into their dinghy, are barely discernible through the fog created by the intensely engraved surface, captured in the shadowy mists of late evening. There is minimal, but nonetheless adequate, delineation of heads faces, shoulders and hunched backs for us to recognise that these are frightened and distressed people forced together in a desperate moment in their lives. Mitchell's testimony, Lanchester's fiction and Dash's paintings, through their expert manipulation of form, make us focus on specificity and presentness: this place, these people, this moment; yet they also speak to the ubiquity of inequality and mass displacement, and the disgrace it brings to the rich, 'developed' world.

In Martha McAlpine's film (2015/17) of Dash at work in his studio, Dash speaks of moving into the 'teeth of racism' when he came to Oxford in 1957 from Barbados as an 11 year old, and how for working class children at his school it was either 'sink or swim', an apposite choice of phrase given his current subject matter. Nonetheless, the art room was his sanctuary as a boy, and his home paintings of the once familiar but now distant Caribbean life gave him some solace and kick-started a long and

distinguished career as an artist and educator. The art room as a sanctuary is a story familiar to many in the field of art education, and Dash's transcendence into such a critically powerful force in our contemporary art world is a prescient reminder of the potential of our work as educators of art. The UK suffers from sustained cuts to state education and a curtailing of the creative arts in schools in favour of an instrumental curriculum, a pattern that can be seen elsewhere in the world. This makes it difficult for schools to adopt a creative or progressive approach to education that might attend to the chronic problems associated with inequality. Ironically the arts continue to be well resourced in some privately funded schools that are free of government intervention, and state policies need to reinstate the arts as central rather than marginal to the curriculum, in order that disadvantaged children everywhere have the opportunity to flourish.

## References

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