

GABY SAHHAR

WHY THE SOUTH LONDON MULTI-DISCIPLINARY ARTIST IS REFUSING THE GENTRIFICATION OF QUEER SPACES IN LONDON

Text by Rebecca O'Dwyer

Raised in Streatham, a traditionally working-class neighbourhood in South London, 27-year-old Gaby Sahhar is more than qualified to make art about urban space. In recent years, Sahhar has watched their native Streatham grow steadily more alien. Diverse communities have been replaced by a heteronormative monoculture, accompanied by a gentrified stream of franchised coffee shops, luxury developments and 24-hour gyms. This process – what the artist refers to as 'genderfication' – leads to a homogenisation not only of city space but of the people who get to live there. In Streatham, as with Brooklyn or Berlin's Kreuzkölln neighbourhood, queer spaces and modes of living are invariably pushed out. Crucially, the work done by artists and queer individuals invariably sets the scene for a new ideal: as Sahhar sees it, for wealthier communities. "More straight white men, more families ... less diversity." Here, privilege takes a spatial turn.

This idea of 'genderfication' – and with it, the shrinking range of possibilities afforded to queer individuals – is central to Sahhar's practice, which takes in video, painting, performance, writing and film. These ideas were explored at the



artist's recent summer exhibition, *Second Home*, at Berlin's Sweetwater gallery through a kaleidoscopic installation. Lengths of painted paper, undulating with showy patterns in turquoise, pink and emerald green, unfurled down from the ceiling, smothering the walls and the floor. Above this hung a series of large works on paper, pitch-black vignettes of inner-city life, while a pair of intimate, text-based videos played out facing one another on the floor. The idea behind the installation, Sahhar says, was to allow visitors to "reconnect with a certain element of themselves which maybe they might have lost through gentrification, as ambitious as that sounds". Part-construction site, part-studio, the exhibition hinted at a creative and experimental public space quite unlike the banal iterations currently being rattled off in London and Berlin.

Sahhar's studio practice is accompanied by constant activist work. While critical of other students who – Sahhar feels, fetishised working-class culture – studying fine art at Goldsmiths, University of London, taught them "to engage with political art



Gaby Sahhar, *Second Home* (installation detail view), Sweetwater, Berlin. Photos: graysc.de. Courtesy of Sweetwater



forms", leading to a series of site-specific art projects that critiqued changes unfolding in Streatham and elsewhere. A year after their graduation in 2015, Sahhar staged a performative film screening, *Upgrade Me*, in their local Tesco; in 2017, some of their paintings were exhibited at Arcadia Missa New York, too.

While enjoying their success, Sahhar sees it as an opportunity for more activist work, founding the organisation Queerdirect in 2017. The aim behind it, they say, was simple: to "platform queer arts in the way I wanted to see it platformed, rather than being misrepresented by other people". This has meant facilitating events at institutions including Tate and Somerset House, and forging temporary, if still valuable, opportunities for queer artists. Expressing admiration for New York's permanent, dedicated queer art spaces – the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay & Lesbian Art, most notably, along with the gallery Queer Thoughts – Sahhar hints at the kind of work in which Queerdirect could hopefully play a role down the line.

In July, Sahhar curated a performance night at Autograph in Shoreditch alongside *[Sur]passing*, an exhibition by the queer artist Lola Flash, a member of the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP). Elsewhere, they will work on a publication mapping the queer art scene in London, participate in a residency at Mayfair art space Mimososa House, and lead a youth workshop at Tate, where they will use Queerdirect and *Upgrade Me* as case studies to show the possibilities of art as a form of political protest.



Returning to their studio work, Sahhar describes the "aesthetics and sickly-sweet qualities" of pop music as an important influence, in particular London radio station Kiss FM, with its indelible link to urban space. Such music, they feel, can be universal, and because of this, Sahhar enjoys "using it as a tool to tell stories". Urban space and masculinity are key themes, "analysing men from an outsider's point of view",

seeing how they act in space, and how space acts with – and even anticipates – them. More than anything, though, Sahhar is influenced by their queer friend group and by "having a lot of discussions ... about how they perceive the world based on their sexual or gender identity". Speaking with Sahhar, it is clear that these informal, intimate, small-scale and hard-won alliances are the most potent means of staying critical and warding off the gentrification of the self.

Gaby Sahhar, *Second Home* (installation detail view), Sweetwater, Berlin. Photos: graysc.de. Courtesy of Sweetwater