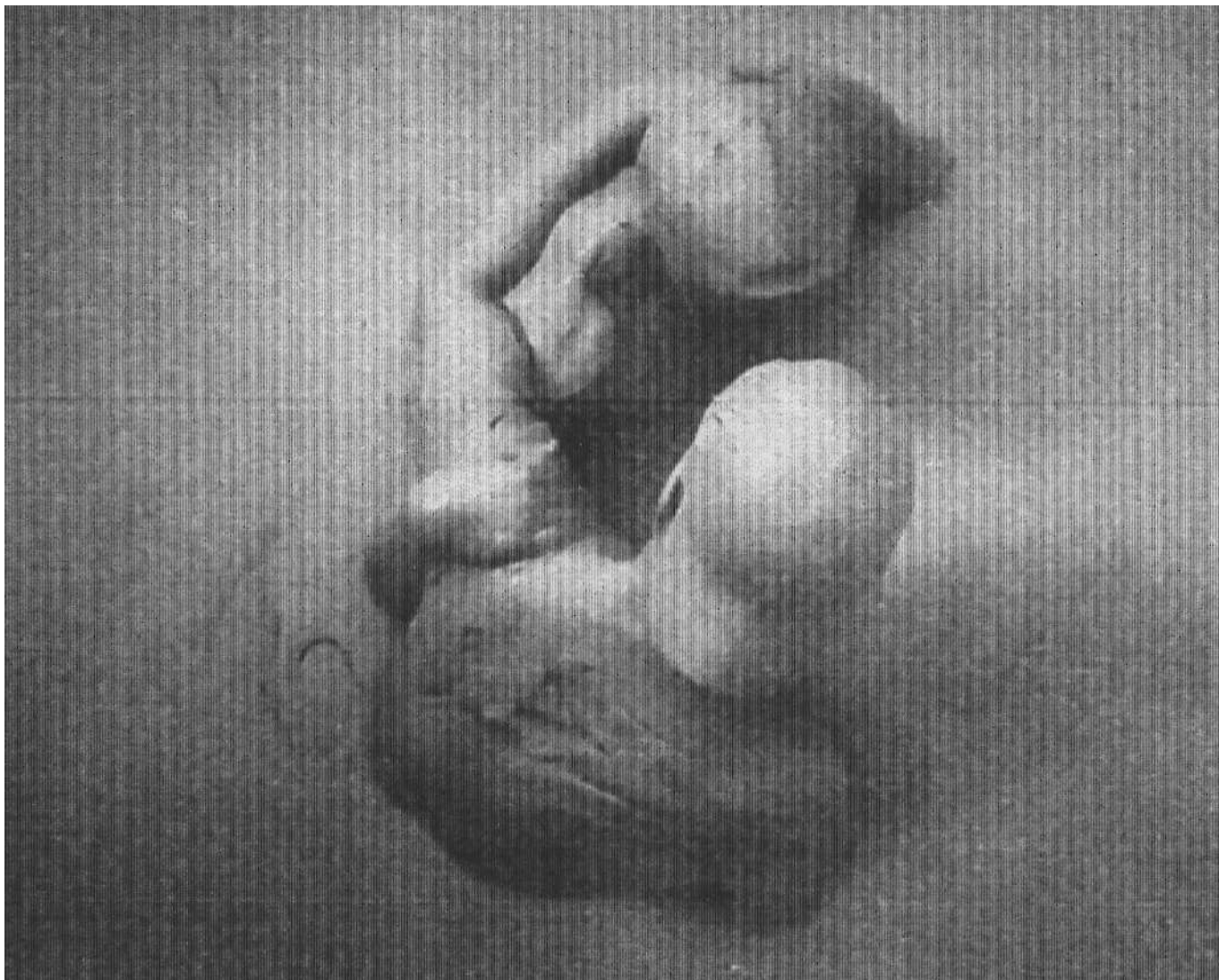


Art Living

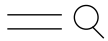
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Like art, food (and booze) facilitates connection. In ‘Sharing Plates,’ a new column for Elephant magazine, Ella Slater sits down for an evening spent at the favourite restaurants of contemporary cultural protagonists for an IRL experience.



Louis Blue Newby & Laila Majid, ‘process image.’ Process image courtesy of the artists.



I meet Laila Majid and Louis Blue Newby for dinner at what looks like an old sausage shop, wedged into a row of larger chain stores on London's Walworth Rd. It's unassuming, but I spot Newby smoking outside and, shortly afterwards, the distinctive art-deco fittings and red linoleum flooring of Lao Dao, the sibling of Camberwell's Xinjiang hotspot, Silk Road. It's an unpretentious setting, and it feels suited to our midweek meeting, crammed between the artist duo's days spent drawing at their desks and listening to the audiobook version of Julia Fox's unfiltered autobiography, *Down the Drain*—Majid and Newby are working in preparation for their upcoming debut institutional exhibition. *Inner Heat* was originally due to open at Goldsmiths CCA in July, but is now occurring in November (more on this later), though our conversation takes place prior to this postponement, held to the backing track of the restaurant's elevator music.

The pair's upwards trajectory through London's art scene began on their BA degree course at the Chelsea College of Arts; it is here that we begin our discussion. As Newby puts it, their collaboration began as "a literal text chain of two people trying to keep in touch." Each would send images to the other which caught their eye, and "after a few months we realised there was something in this archive of imagery that we were developing and sending. So we started saving everything, and cataloguing it." Majid quips in: "we always say that one of the most useful places for us to go back through is our text history," and I remark that they'd better not lose their phones. "I worry about this daily", Newby responds.



Louis Blue Newby & Laila Majid, *xxijra*. Images courtesy of the artists and Xxjira Hii.

The iPhone origins of their partnership still feel prescient to themes explored in the duo's current practice, which primarily takes the form of drawings and installations tracing sentiments of desire and collectivity surrounding ephemeral imagery. It also constructs a visual language based on what the artists describe as "mediation," or the form of communication itself. Still, their first works together weren't completely formed. "We did a show together in the summer of 2019," Majid tells me, "we made quite simple, small, flat things: a visual essay of found images, as well as sculptural works, silicone casts of sex toys". "It was very 2019," Newby laughs, "very 21 year old, post-grad art. You'd struggle to find any imagery of it- I think we've tried to erase it all."



Louis Blue Newby & Laila Majid, Spread (When Too Much is Not Enough). Images courtesy of the artists and Xxjira Hii

Our cocktails arrive—Newby has ordered a Cuba libre, and myself and Majid something called *2B or not 2B?* (I love), which arrives in a hilariously anticlimactic Jägerbomb-like display. We order food, or rather, Newby orders it, since he’s the only one who has dined at the spot before. The artist is a South London native, having lived here for his entire life. Majid, on the other hand, grew up in Abu Dhabi, which she returned to during the Covid pandemic, also shortly after the pair began working together. The show through which I was introduced to them, titled ‘not yet,’ and held at San Mei Gallery in 2022, consisted of a moving image work, constructed almost entirely remotely, *south florida sky*. The film reimagined the comic hero Swamp Thing through animation and GAN generated imagery, then filtered through 16mm film documentation. One of the conceptual backbones of the work was a text by José Esteban Muñoz, which, as Newby explains, argues that “to really critique where we are in the present you have to conjure both the past and the future”. Majid explains: “The work was fronted by this specific, warm analogue texture [16mm], but it was displaced, because there were these moments of digital glitch, or hand drawn elements. Nothing was as it seems, as it should have been.”

Although they are still at the beginning of their careers, the pair seem to have been consistently busy since they began working together, particularly as they balance their individual practices alongside their collaborative work. They also occasionally teach, and Newby works for the artists Hannah Quinlan and Rosie Hastings (it feels suited that his employers are also an artist duo). “There are always multiple things going on for us,” Majid explains. “Sometimes collaborative work will be at the forefront, sometimes individual commitments. It’s a balancing act.” I ask if it’s nice to have distance from each individual project; an ability to switch between practices. “I can get disillusioned sometimes when I’m working by myself,” Newby says, “but the collaborative practice is so different, because it has a social element. Half the work we do is finding and talking about images, and that’s basically what everyone does with their friends all the time anyway, particularly on Instagram. So if anything, the collaboration has always been this nice respite.”

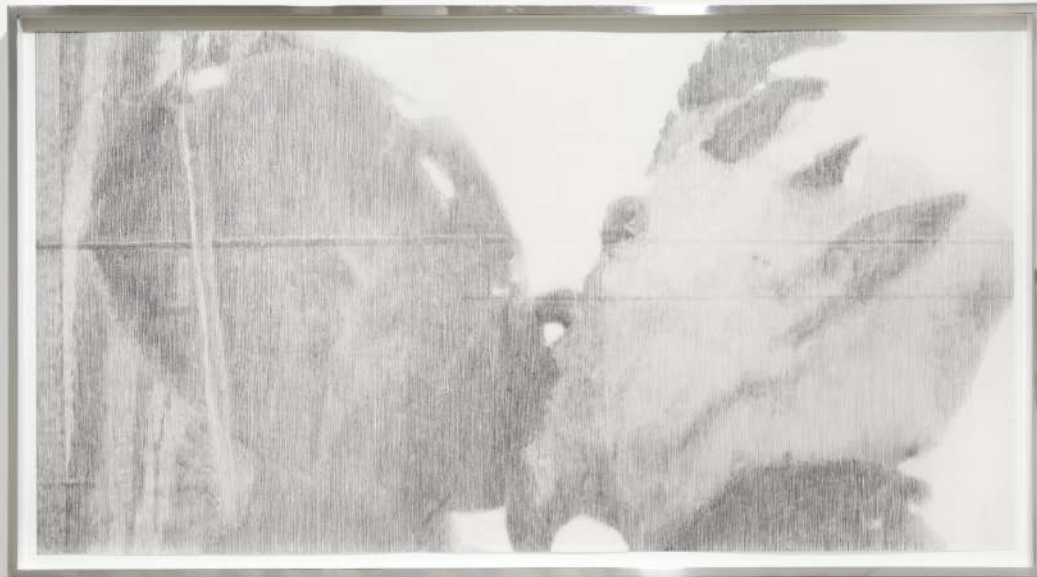


Louis Blue Newby & Laila Majid, *Spread (In A World of Fantasy)*. Images courtesy of the artists and Xxijra Hii.

In some ways, the Goldsmiths CCA show will be a continuation of the work shown last year, but at a notably larger scale. The largest work will be three metres long, constructed in six panels: an amalgamation of drawing and earlier collage works. I ask what draws Majid and Newby to the pictures they place alongside each other. “We always come back to images that feel quite deviant, or non-normative,” Newby explains. Majid adds: “or images which might playfully allude to something a lot more subversive, so a lot of the things that we gravitate towards are bodies that have gone through transformation, whether that’s through anthropomorphism or playing with ideas around gender.”

Another characteristic of their work which strikes me is its investigations into desire, which naturally implicates eroticism. *Inner Heat* is informed by the philosopher Michael Taussig’s essay on ‘public secrecy’ named after Georg Simmel’s maxim that ‘secrecy magnifies reality,’ and the same might apply to desire, fuelled so often by what is concealed from us. Majid and Newby’s drawings are ambiguous and enigmatic, creating, as the former describes, “a more challenging relationship between the image and the viewer, since information isn’t given in a direct way, making the viewing relationship so much more engaged, or more active.” “It’s a kind of erotic power play,” Newby adds, “the image starts to take control of itself a little bit more.”

As aforementioned, *Inner Heat* was originally scheduled to open in July, but has been postponed to November due to the occupation of Goldsmiths by pro-Palestinian student activists, in protest of the institution’s stance over the conflict in Gaza and ties to pro-Israeli donors. Both Majid and Newby have released statements of support for the movement on Instagram. The delay means that the show will open around the same time as a group exhibition being curated by the pair at Xxijra Hii. Titled *Forum*, it will draw upon the same themes as *Inner Heat*, particularly—as Majid tells me—“processes of dialogue or exchange, and public moments of interaction between different bodies, different people, and different voices.”



Louis Blue Newby & Laila Majid, *Contact (The Kiss)*. Images courtesy of the artists and Xxjira Hii.

At this point, our steady slurping of noodles has quietened. The conversation has shifted to lighter subjects, like where we'd like to live if not London (Newby: "I have a sick and twisted fantasy of moving to LA," and Majid: "If I could speak the language, I'd love to go to Tokyo"). Eventually, I switch off my phone and Newby bags up our leftovers for his flatmates. As we part ways and head home, I send my friend an image from the restaurant, and then—thinking of the evening's conversation—head to the 'pictures' section of our iMessage conversation. Here is a cultural cross-section of our lives, private moments made public and vice versa: selfies, screenshots and art. It's the crux of Majid and Newby's practice on a minute scale; it is an invitation to think about what we desire, and why we're drawn to it.