

FREQUENCIES

A solo exhibition by Jamil GS

Essay by curator Adrian Preisler

18.05–01.10.24

MILAAP

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milaap.dk

This exhibition sheds a different light on one of the most influential figures within the visual culture of hip hop. Photographer Jamil Gulmann Shihab, AKA Jamil GS (*1971, DK/US), is celebrated for his portraiture and its instrumental role in, as one publication put it, “teaching hip hop how to pose for the camera.” 2024 marks the 30th anniversary of Shihab’s first work, a series of jazz legend Donald Byrd. Instead of merely presenting his best-known work, *FREQUENCIES* includes the ancillary materials of his practice: contact sheets, negatives and print plates, along with never exhibited and newly commissioned works specifically made for the exhibition. Curiously, MILAAP is located just down the street from where Shihab’s parents, Sahib Shihab and Maiken Gulmann, celebrated their wedding, just like the founder of MILAAP, Khurram Jamil, attended the mosque in Hvidovre (the first in Denmark) that Shihab’s father was a member of as well. A fitting place to look back at three decades of era-defining work.

One of the mainstays of Shihab’s practice is his use of film: a more time-intensive method than digital photography, but one that supplies us with a certain rich grain to its interplays of color, light, and shadow, asides from the nostalgia for its aesthetics felt by many. When he started out in the 90’s, Shihab struggled with most of the commercially available film he used: it didn’t render the skin tones of his mostly Black subjects properly. The historical promise of photography, that of representing reality “as it is,” was out of reach if he utilized traditional methods of developing his works. Discretely enforcing the already lacking representation of Black subjects, the window to reality promised by the supposedly neutral technology was anything but. In jury-rigging his way around this lack, the work of Shihab becomes a discrete struggle of inclusive representation against a quiet obstruction. From Shihab’s perspective, this racist camera film might have been so due to calculated indifference – companies thinking Black people weren’t an attractive customer demographic – which in and of itself is no better than deliberate malice.

“The true picture of the past *whizzes* by. Only as a picture, which flashes its final farewell in the moment of its recognizability, is the past to be held fast.”

Walter Benjamin, *On the Concept of History* (1940)

Whizz. Then again, was there ever a *true* picture to begin with? What are we, as many have already pointed out, *re-presenting* in any picture of anything whatsoever? And why even talk about history, representation, and the past in an exhibition full of portraits of hip-hop icons?

I’d like you to think of two different, yet related, conceptions of the term *representation*. One is a matter of resemblance, the other of inclusion, yet they start from the same question: *how can we [re]present what’s out there?* There’s the interest in rendering reality *as it is*, a main strand of Western cultural history, an interest in rendering things “as they are”, *re-presenting* as in *putting forth* (*presentation*) something *again* (*re-*). The *again* is significant – an assumption that what is put forth is *like* its original, giving the representation its force through (alleged) authenticity, neutrality or objectivity. Yet when we speak of representation as inclusion there is a criticism of the *previous* fantasy of representation, in that it *lacks* its claimed all-encompassing scope. “Reality” is thought by some to be rendered *as it is*, and its representation is thought of as correct, corresponding to “how the world is.” But the four corners of a camera can only fit so much. There is not just (re-)presenting, but also a critical search for what lacks, or as is more often the case: what is *left out*.

We’ll shift and back up a bit. Whizz back, hold fast on the flurry of images. In the 90’s, a teenager from Copenhagen moves to New York. The son of an expatriate American jazz legend and his Danish wife, he’s fallen in love with hip-hop, scrawling graffiti on S-trains and getting into youth misdemeanors. He loses his father and goes halfway across the world, to his father’s hometown. 30 years ago, he takes a photograph of Donald Byrd, one of the all-time greats of jazz and one of the biggest influences on hip hop. Then things escalate. JAY-Z, Mary J. Blige, Usher, Kelis, D’Angelo, Nas...a pantheon of 90’s and 00’s cultural icons all parade, perform, pose through the camera of Jamil Gulmann Shihab. And *pantheon* is a fitting word. While these deities of popular culture grow in acclaim, Shihab further tweaks the near-mythological grandeur that suffuses his work, his “Ghetto Fabulous” style: Harlem meets Paris, couture fits pair with Nikes, kids from the ‘hood rise to a godlike status. Looking at his photographs from that time compared to photos of rappers today, Shihab’s influence on how hip-hop poses for the camera cannot be overstated. Presenting his vision of the Ghetto Fabulous look to clients, Shihab had to sneak in the aesthetic at first. *Why would you wear Nikes with an haute couture getup?* they’d say. To Shihab, it was not just about the blending of styles into a certain look; it was about showcasing the people wearing them, whether celebrities or street cast models, at their most *fabulous*. The word *fabulous* comes from Latin *fabulosus*: “celebrated in fable” or “rich in myths”, which

only fits the name. Shihab's approach, whether it chooses Harlem rappers, East L.A. citizens or Kingston clubgoers, turns them into creatures of myth and fable: diasporic deities of the street, block and dancehall.

In the first room of MILAAP, we find a series of tableaux, mixing photographs and their associated contact sheets, that serve as an intimate index of Shihab's process. From left to right, we have his first series of Donald Byrd and his band; his notorious series of photographs of JAY-Z from before his breakthrough; and a newer series of Drake that overlaps strongly with Shihab's earlier work. The tableaux include inverted versions of the works in the series, allowing us to adjust our view to the otherwise easily overlooked interplays of light and shadow already in the work. Along the corner walls on each side of the tableaux, we find glass-framed instructions for Shihab's different printers, allowing us a peek into his process behind the series and his preferences for film development.

In his portrait series of Donald Byrd, Shihab utilizes a stark white background, a table the only other visible object near the legendary trumpeter. Like Shihab says, "it all starts with the music", and jazz is often seen as an ancestor of hip hop – it becomes fitting to see this guiding star stand near-isolated, as if the world itself has disappeared around Byrd and his instrument.

This fable-like aspect of Shihab's work is strong in his series with JAY-Z. Take for example the fisheye effect used in several of the images, which makes the Manhattan skyscrapers look like they're bending towards him: the future rap mogul like a supermassive black hole in the middle of Manhattan, twisting the towers out of shape. "If it wasn't for these pictures they wouldn't see me at all," he rapped on *Oceans*, Shihab reminds me. Closer to the present, we find a useful example of the influence of Shihab's work. In the tableau with his 2019 photographs of Drake, Shihab noticed during the process that Drake was emulating his earlier work; putting himself in situations akin to a shot he did of Usher around 20 years prior, like posing on a golf course or at the beach. Elsewhere, he's emulated a pose with his own crew in a parking lot that looks extremely similar to a series Shihab took of rapper Juvenile in the 00's. Looking at the series today, the overlaps and similarities between these vastly different works and their influence on one of the best-selling artists in hip-hop speak to the impact of Shihab's work without need for further explanation.

In the room where SUPERFLEX's *One Two Three Swing!* and Rasheed Araeen's *Milaap* stand as permanent fixtures, we're treated to a wider panoply of material. A stack of Shihab's archive folders stand as a sculpture, while glass plates frame two collages of wider selections of his work; one focuses on the US, with work primarily from two of the most important centers of hip hop and jazz, New York and Los Angeles, while the other is dedicated to Jamaica, home of reggae. The left collage shows "classic" Shihab works, showcasing the breadth of expression of the Ghetto Fabulous aesthetic – some of the works never seen before. The right collage, meanwhile, is dedicated to Jamaica – a mix of stickers and photographs of the island nation's natural beauty alongside its vibrant nightlife and everyday snapshots. Along the walls are aluminum print plates in red, black and blue ink, used for posters, with a photograph of Wu-Tang Clan's Raekwon and Ghostface Killah from 1995. Their patina has muddied the prints considerably, allowing them a painterly quality verging closer to abstract painting than photographic precision. In a shifting sequence with the print plates, a series of copper plates with prints of Mary J. Blige, Kelis and one of the works from Shihab's *Brooklyn Queens* series intersect with the patinated print plates.

At the end of the room, the "title work" of *FREQUENCIES* hangs behind Araeen's *Milaap* – the sculptural manifesto of the exhibition space. It features a print of Jamaican sound systems: ingeniously constructed stacks of speakers and electrical appliances, cobbled together to make what Shihab to this day is still the best sound quality he's ever experienced. Here is the heart of the exhibition, his work, and the sensibilities of the diasporic cultures he depicts. The choice of copper is not merely for visual effect. Though partly inspired by Robert Rauschenberg's *Copperheads* series of prints on copper, the term "copper-colored" has a charged history within US racial relations, utilized as a blanket term for BIPOC people as well as individuals of mixed Black and Native American heritage. Yet it's not just a metaphor: objects made from the material, sheet- or shieldlike so-called "coppers", were an extremely valuable gift in Native North American potlatch ceremonies, bestowed with potent supernatural properties and markers of personal wealth and power. Copper is a conductor for electromagnetic frequencies, an integral part of the technologies that make both music and photography flourish, but hints towards histories of representation, identity and power in the US. Just as we speak of musical or photographic frequency, the use of copper becomes an ample metaphor for the interconnectedness of all these different ways of *tuning in*.

It all starts with the music: copper plates blasting their frequencies through history, space and time, enmeshing us in the rich field of culture they point to.

The logo for MILAAP is rendered in a bold, yellow, sans-serif font. The letters are thick and blocky, with a slightly irregular, hand-drawn quality. The 'M' and 'A's are particularly prominent, with the 'A's having a small circular cutout in the center. The overall style is modern and graphic.