

eclectica
contemporary



Between Truth and FICTION

HASAN

ESSOP



Between Truth and FICTION

The photographic image has long been understood as a witness to reality: a record of what was there, what happened, what could be seen. Yet photography has never been entirely objective. It has always involved selection, staging, framing and interpretation. In the contemporary image-saturated world, where photographs can be endlessly manipulated, circulated and reassembled, the distance between what is real and what is constructed has become increasingly difficult to locate.

This body of work marks a significant moment in Essop's practice. After nearly two decades of working collaboratively with his twin brother, he returns to a visual language they developed together through performance, photography and digital collage, but now enters it alone. The work is therefore both a continuation and a departure. Its origins remain visible, but the questions have shifted. What happens to a shared visual language when it is inhabited by a single artist? What remains when collaboration gives way to an individual voice?

Hasan's photographs are not documents of events that have happened. He performs every character himself, constructing scenes through costume, props, gesture and carefully choreographed action before transforming these performances through photography and collage. Performance becomes the starting point, but not its subject. It is a method through which identity can be constructed, exaggerated and questioned.

The resulting images occupy an uncertain space between theatre, documentary and memory. They appear to record something, yet everything within them has been deliberately assembled. Architecture is imagined. Perspective is sometimes incomplete. Construction lines remain visible. Hand drawing and painting enter the photographic surface. Rather than pursuing the seamless illusion made possible by digital technologies, Essop increasingly allows the evidence of making to remain present.

This insistence on construction is significant. At a time when artificial intelligence can generate increasingly convincing images without a photographic event ever having taken place, Essop draws attention to the labour, performance and physical decisions behind the image. The visible hand becomes a reminder that images are made, not simply found.

But the construction taking place in these works extends beyond the photograph. It is also the construction of identity.

Essop's figures inhabit a world where religious, African, cultural and contemporary identities intersect. Islamic garments meet African textiles; ritual encounters consumer objects; traditional symbols of authority coexist with theatrical costume. These combinations do not attempt to resolve difference. Instead, they allow contradiction and coexistence to remain visible.

As a South African of Indian heritage, he describes himself through multiple and overlapping positions: African, Muslim, Indian and, historically, one half of a twin. These identities are not presented as competing categories but as layers that coexist and continually reshape one another. His work embraces hybridity not as an abstract condition, but as an everyday reality.

The costumes therefore operate as more than visual devices. They become a form of collage in themselves. Garments, textiles, objects and symbols bring histories into contact. They suggest that identity is formed through movement, encounter and exchange rather than inherited as a fixed and uncontested category.

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The repeated figure, a recurring element in Essop's practice, takes on a particular significance in this body of work. In the past, multiplication could be understood through the physical presence of two brothers and their repeated bodies within the same image. Here, only one body occupies the stage. Yet multiplicity remains.

The single figure becomes a congregation, a community, a leader, a follower, a consumer, a migrant and an imagined historical figure.

This shift is central to the work. Hasan is no longer simply multiplying the self; he is multiplying the possibilities of identity. Through repetition, he asks us to consider how many versions of ourselves we perform, consciously or unconsciously, in order to move through the world.

The theatricality is deliberate. Identity is presented not as a fixed truth, but as something learned, performed and continually negotiated. Clothing, gesture, posture, ritual and objects become visual languages through which belonging is communicated. The figures appear to occupy roles, but those roles also expose something of the structures through which we understand one another.

The work emerges from a society in which questions of nationality, ancestry, migration and citizenship remain deeply contested. Recurring waves of xenophobia expose how quickly belonging can be reduced to visible markers of difference. Hasan responds not through direct reportage, but through constructed encounters. His figures wait, kneel, carry documents, groceries and personal possessions. Their gestures are ordinary, yet they evoke bureaucracy, displacement, vulnerability and the desire to be recognised.

The mosque interiors that appear throughout the work intensify this tension. They are spaces of worship, but also spaces in which spiritual ideals encounter the realities of the societies in which people live. At the centre of the work is Qur'an 49:13 and its proposition that humanity has been made into peoples and tribes so that we may know one another. He does not illustrate the verse literally. Instead, it provides an ethical foundation for the work.

Against the idea of difference as something to fear or exclude, the work proposes difference as a condition through which humanity might recognise itself.

The tension between these two positions is fundamental: the ideal of equality before God against the persistence of social systems that distinguish between people according to race, nationality, ethnicity and ancestry.

The photographs do not resolve this contradiction. It is staged.

And staging, for Essop, is never neutral. It allows reality to be examined through fiction. By constructing scenes rather than documenting them, he creates a space in which social realities can be made strange enough to be seen differently.

The collaged drawings extend this process further. While the photographs preserve traces of the original performance, the drawings move away from documentation and towards memory, imagination and mythology. Architectural spaces become stages. Congregations become audiences. Performers become characters.

The boundaries between religious ceremony, theatre and social reality remain deliberately unstable.

Between Truth and Fiction ultimately moves beyond the question of photographic manipulation to consider the instability of identity itself. Hasan's figures inhabit multiple worlds and perform multiple selves. They carry histories while imagining futures. They occupy spaces between faith and culture, belonging and exclusion, reality and invention.



Hasan Essop
The Things We Carry, 2026
(1/5 & 1AP)
Pigment Print on Cotton Rag
82.3 x 42 cm
ZAR 11,800 excl. VAT



Hasan Essop
What We Bring with Us, 2026
(1/5 & 1AP)
Pigment Print on Cotton Rag
82.3 x 42 cm
ZAR 11,800 excl. VAT



Hasan Essop
Ancestral Authority, 2026
(1/5 & 1AP)
Pigment Print on Cotton Rag
59.9 x 42 cm
ZAR 11,800 excl. VAT



Hasan Essop
House of Mercy, 2026
Charcoal, Watercolour, Collage
105 x 85 cm
ZAR 17,800 excl. VAT



Hasan Essop
The Gathering, 2026
Charcoal, Watercolour, Collage
105 x 85 cm
ZAR 17,800 excl. VAT

Eclectica Contemporary is a Cape Town-based gallery dedicated to contemporary artistic practices from Africa and its diaspora.

The gallery presents a dynamic program of emerging and established artists and has participated in leading international art fairs. Artists represented by the gallery have participated in major international biennials and their works are held in significant institutional collections including the Zeitz Museum of Contemporary Art Africa, the Rupert Museum, and the Iziko South African National Gallery, as well as major international foundations and private collections.

Through exhibitions, international presentations, and collaborations with curators and institutions, Eclectica Contemporary contributes to the global discourse surrounding contemporary African art.