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They leave out the bit with Elizabeth Taylor. Warner Bros is apparently preparing a biopic of Julius Caesar, with Jonathan Liebesman of *Battle: Los Angeles* directing. The story is said to focus on Caesar's early career in Spain: where he built the 10th Legion, which he would march on Rome against Pompeii. Expect plenty of swords and sandals



Piercing vision

Christopher Lord catches up with the Abraaj Capital Art Prize winner Shezad Dawood at work on his latest film project in the north of England

On the rooftop carpark of Preston Bus Station, we hunt for signs of where the aliens landed. It's eerily quiet up here, on a textbook grey day in this faded industrial town in the north of England. A group of hooded youths peer over the concrete edge of the station, fumbling in their pockets with the marker pens they're hoping to wield once we've cleared off. But Charles Quick, an artist with an unshakable adoration for Preston, sees more than just rolling hills and the tall chimneys of the disused mills around us. "See these arrows?" he says, deadpan, pointing at the yellow markers leading toward the exit ramp. "That was the landing pad."

Quick is the co-founder of *In Certain Places*, a programme that invites artists to come to Preston and create a public artwork that offers a rethink of this old market town. Together with Elaine Speight – the other half of *In Certain Places* – Quick invited Shezad Dawood, winner of this year's Abraaj Capital Art Prize, to the English north in 2009.

"For us, it's important that we find artists ready to work across different mediums, and also that they do extensive research in creating a piece. These are both key elements of Shezad's practice."

But it's not until the artist climbs his way to the top of the bus station – a much-loved-much-foathed concrete flourish of 1960s brutalist architecture – that the extraordinary tale behind this subversive sci-fi emerges.

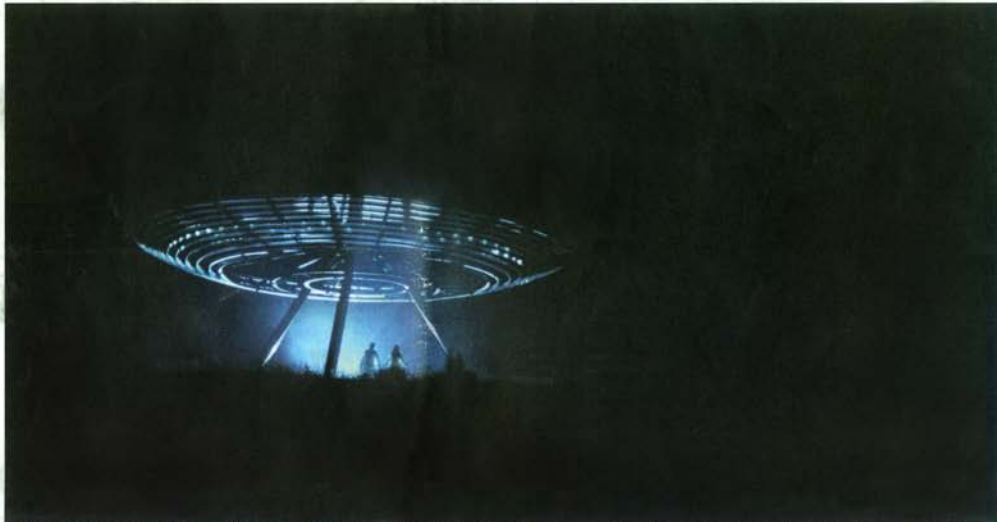
Filming of *Piercing Brightness*, commissioned by *In Certain Places*, began in early July with Dawood as director and writer. The premise is that aliens landed in Preston centuries ago with the mission to learn the ways of human civilisation from its inhabitants. Shifting shape to blend in, the aliens – with the passage of time, eras and, we might imagine, the advent of social networking – slowly forgot their mission over the course of several lifetimes.

Piercing Brightness picks up just as the "Glorious 100", the original visitors, are supposed to be going home. Two aliens are dispatched, taking on the form of Chinese immigrants, to round the Glorious up and get them back to the mother-ship. Cue car chases, cosmic encounters and rituals in the River Ribble.

A pared-down version of the film will be shown to coincide with a touring mid-career retrospective of Dawood's work, beginning in Preston. And there are rumours that *Piercing Brightness* will premiere at Dubai International Film Festival in November.

As with much of Dawood's work, a sense of conceptual tightness defines this latest project. His academic background spurs him on to cover all bases: he ensures that the ideas informing the work fit together like a finely wrought essay. This is achieved through an ever-blossoming patchwork of research – knitting synchronicities and fragile, startling connections between the most disparate materials.

Dawood's work for the Abraaj Capital Art Prize, shown at Art Dubai this year, recreated Brian Gysin's "Dream Machines", originally designed in 1960s Tangiers to induce lucid dreaming in the viewer. His research for the project, detailed



Above and below, scenes from Shezad Dawood's film *Piercing Brightness*, commissioned by *In Certain Places*, a programme that invites artists to create a public artwork in the town of Preston. Courtesy: UBK Productions Ltd



in the accompanying catalogue, spanned everything from cosmological diagrams by Ibn Arabi to scores of music contemporary to the time.

For *Piercing Brightness*, he made Preston itself the centre of the project, and worked outward from there. As the title-holder region for Britain's most observed UFO activity (sculptures point to the proximity of BAE Systems' testing centre) and the wellspring of the Mormon faith, an epic air hangs over this unassuming town of 132,000. Dawood spent time with the Lancashire Anomalous Phenomena Investigation Society (Lapis), a remarkably active local group made up of debunkers and believers who investigate unexplained sightings in the night sky. He trawled

through local archives to build the past lives of the alien cast – we learn that Naser Khan, played by Bhasker Patel (of the British comedy *Only Fools and Horses* fame), was once a dock-hand, then an old woman, before becoming the Pakistani newsagent owner he is as the story begins. But in the studio we find Dawood hands-on: he is arched prone on the floor, directing an energised crew made up of both local graduates and regular collaborators. "This is the scene inside the spaceship," murmurs a stagehand, as the artist gesticulates to an imagined crowd on the green-screen set behind him. "You'll be able to spot characters in the background who, in previous scenes, seemed just like extras but are in fact one of the Glorious 100."

A couple of takes, and the cast break in preparation for the next scene. Dawood, far more used to solitary studio-time back in London, is clearly in demand.

"I hide in my studio so much that to come on set means I have to reconfigure. Here, I've got to suspend my own needs to stay focused on those of others."

Yet Preston, an indomitable muse of the project, still excites him: "A smaller city can reveal so much more than a larger city about what's happening in the world." He explains that sci-fi can also be a perfect vehicle for that. "I love using genre fiction as a way to talk about politics. It's a nice red herring. But the genres are so loaded: whether it is the Italian Westerns with their Marxist subtext,

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Charles Quick co-founder of the art programme *In Certain Places*

or science fiction that emerged from the counter-culture of the 1960s and reflected on society in a way that mainstream fiction of that time didn't. Genre fiction allows you to make a point without pushing things in people's faces."

He sees *Piercing Brightness* as a meditation on the very nature of how we, as humans, believe. From organised faiths to UFO phenomena, Dawood presents us with characters in the process of having "the ground beneath them shake". As each grapples with the sudden invasion of an interstellar reality, the movie takes us through their realisations, often a refusal to accept, and a shared horror before the uncertain road ahead.

Dawood is hurried back to the studio, and we're ushered in to watch Houda Echouafni, a Moroccan-Egyptian actor, playing Mask – the ethereal figurehead of the alien project, urging the Glorious 100 back home.

"Visually, I imagine it'll be quite stunning, knowing Shezad's work," says Echouafni between takes, sporting an otherworldly texture of swirls on her head. "Theatre directors are often those who allow things to happen on set," she says, commenting on Dawood's directorial technique.

Perhaps this is the virtue of a project like this. We're left with the sense of an accomplished artist improvising and finding fruit on unfamiliar ground. There's something intuitive in the way *Piercing Brightness* has developed. Though there are nods to previous projects – a palette of over-lapping lights and a dazzling weave of influences – this seems to be a pivotal project in Dawood's career as both filmmaker and artist.