

858, Irish Culture, Curiosity, and the Beauty of Storytelling

By Olamide Alao

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Through my discussions with artist Farouk Alao about the *Oh My Demigod* exhibition, many things unravelled and were fascinating to me. I felt the importance of conversation and openness not only as siblings but as fellow artists.

Naturally, we delved into the origins of 858.ie, and what kickstarted Farouk's artistic journey. We discussed his early days as an art student and where this curiosity stemmed from. While studying Design in Limerick, it became quickly apparent how drawn he was to a multiplicity of mediums – photography, art direction, drawing, and audio-visual curation more generally. Farouk described the contrast that he discovered between the need for functionality of design, with the emotional freeness of art. It was clear to me firstly that 858 was not simply a brand, but a culture. Farouk describes 858 as a curated stimulus. While we delved into the roots of the name, we also discussed the significance of origin stories. Knowing where you come from and how that shapes you even in ways you might not be conscious of. [<https://858.ie/> - 'For the curious']

WARP-SPASM AND BROTHERHOOD

One of the most interesting aspects of our conversation were the connections my brother made between himself and Cúchulainn in his commissioned piece titled *I am Cú*, for the *Oh My Demigod* exhibition. The connections were not only about Cúchulainn as a person, but also about subtle nuances in his story. Like Cúchulainn – an outsider who defends place and people regardless of birthplace – Farouk was born elsewhere and moved to Ireland. A mixture of cultures played a crucial role in who they were and later developed to be. Farouk pointed out the distance he once felt while studying Irish mythology in school. Working on this exhibition restored a renewed excitement.

Notably the warp-spasm as a phenomenon was one of these key similarities felt by Farouk. Depicted in Thomas Kinsella's 1969 translation of 'The Táin', warp-spasm is something that not everyone can experience. Farouk described that at the beginning of the commissioning process and his research discussions with the documentary filmmaker and radio producer John Higgins, who retold the tale of *Táin Bó Cuailnge*, the warp-spasm stuck out to him specifically. He explained how it mirrors when he is told he cannot do something, and more specifically being told he is not capable of doing something. It almost triggers a part of him to act out.

Another aspect about the Cúchulainn story that stood out was the significant role brotherhood played. Brotherhood is often complex and uncomfortable yet so fulfilling. Unfortunately, while there is love, society by design often promotes competition and this 'winner v. loser' mentality. Being associated with people who he respects and considers as warriors makes the journey worthwhile. The battle that Cúchulainn faces in his own story is like that of Farouk's own life, albeit without blood and gore, it is complex and sometimes all consuming.

'OH MY DEMIGOD,' IRISH HERITAGE & 'IRISHNESS'

Ireland like many other countries is a melting pot and houses a multitude of cultures. In one respect there are traditional notions of what 'Irish' is; beautiful countryside hills filled with gold and leprechauns. While these traditional identities exist, on the other hand there is an emerging culture. A culture that is evolving and rising from the ground up. Farouk spoke about how although people may see this new culture as an erasure, it is important that we embrace both the richness of the past and present.

Oh My Demigod manages to juxtapose one of Ireland's most cherished artists Louis le Brocquy alongside great contemporaries. The placement of le Brocquy's unframed pieces, a selection of *The Táin*, Aubusson Tapestries, Atelier René Duché (1998/2001), alongside the strong visual audio pieces, dismantles any hierarchy between the works. In many conventional exhibitions there is often signage that distinguishes the pieces such as 'do not touch' or security barriers. In this exhibition we see none of this – there

is a rawness in the exchange of times and cultures. In many respects the variety in the pieces once again reinforces the richness of the past and the freshness of the present. While it is only natural to draw direct similarities between the pieces, it is important to note that each artist in the exhibition expresses their own story, in their own unique forms. In other words, the key connection that can be found is the storytelling medium.

Farouk highlighted for instance how he sees Michelle Doyle/Rising Damp's audio piece *recording-20210818-204832* (2022), which focuses on the rehearsal stage in the artistic process, as echoing the bubbling Irish youth culture today. While it is difficult to describe at times, Irish youth culture is still rooted in the love of art and creative expression.

Temple Bar specifically as a creative hub has a unique power in holding space for art and artists. In Farouk's words, "Every door you enter in Temple Bar, whether it is a gallery, pub, or shop, leads you to different worlds, where different stories are being told." Diverse cultures and elements of the classical and modern merge.

POST PANDEMIC WORLD & INVESTMENT IN THE ARTS

Like many other things the pandemic has shown us the necessity of art. Irish society has relied on art as a healer and to comment on the constantly changing world.

Farouk reinforced the importance of funding in the creative industries. Meaning more exhibitions, and funding for the youth. Showing young people the possibilities even as early as primary school, it is also important to listen to young people. Understanding their experiences will help in knowing how to tackle issues that they face. Additionally, investment that is not only centred around alcohol culture is important. In recent years, we have seen several venues and art spaces shutting down, and it can be so disheartening. While creativity in Ireland is bubbling, it needs long term support. For a lot of young people, they see going abroad as the only option. While on the surface this is not a problem, this should not be the long-term solution.

The artist talk, *Wait 'til I tell you about the warp-spasm...* hosted at Temple Bar Gallery + Studios as part of the public programme for the *Oh My Demigod* exhibition,

demonstrated that dialogue between various generations can be held, and the 'generational gap' we often hear about is something we can certainly address. Seeing diverse faces in such an authentic way – in both the audience and the discussion panel of artists – gives hope.

My conversation with Farouk ended with this same hope, touching on one of his main driving forces; the desire for young people to see other people who look like him doing every and anything. Whether it is in traditional or unconventional careers, seeing people that look like you makes it a reality. Pushing boundaries has been transformational and is what keeps the curiosity alive.