

STELLA BARNES PORTFOLIO 2026

Participatory Arts

The Paper Project 2013-17

In 2013 I established a collective of young migrants, who were alumni from a youth arts project at Ovalhouse (now Brixton House). Together we made a series of highly visual, immersive performances and installations, inspired by their first-hand experiences of migration, personal loss and the EU's position on migrant boats crossing the Mediterranean. The process centred around identifying symbolic objects or metaphors to communicate content, thereby creating fictional distance from potentially traumatic material. Each work was aligned with a relevant campaign or current migration issue. *Safina Al Hayat* was featured in a BBC documentary.



Site Specific Performance/Intallation, made in solidarity with undocumented refugee children, OvalHouse, London and Contact Theatre, Manchester 2013-14 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2N4YwayTNa4>



I Was a Child Somewhere Else, site specific performance and installation, exploring the impact of forced migration and fractured family life on the artists' transition from childhood to adulthood, commissioned by Counterpoint Arts. Museum of Childhood 2014. Each performer abandoned a pair of shoes, with a small object tucked inside, as a metaphorical symbols of the childhood they left behind in another country.



Safina Al Hayat (Life Boat), exploring the EU response to migrant boats crossing the Mediterranean and deaths by drowning of refugees. The performance used physical theatre to represent the hostility created by European government policy. Ovalhouse and Southbank Centre 2015 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p0376swt>



We are Not Birds, site specific durational performance and installation, looking at the experiences of migrants, especially migrant workers. Southbank Centre, London 2016

Artist in Residence, Clapham Park Estate, 2017-18

I was commissioned by Counterpoints Arts during a regeneration process by Metropolitan Housing Association in a South London housing estate. I spent a lot of time with older residents, many of whom were first generation migrants and some were part of the Windrush Generation. We talked about relationships with neighbours and the stronger sense of neighbourliness they experienced in the past. One woman, Trish, who died during the project, used a small walking trolley, with many key fobs attached to it, from places she had visited across world. This inspired the use of key fobs in the installation. The keys, from demolished flats, including previous homes of group members who had been rehoused, were gifted to us by the Metropolitan Housing. The mesh frame mirrored the WWII stretchers, reused as fences on the estate for over 70 years.



My Neighbour's Keys, narrative installation made with older residents on Clapham Park Estate, 2018

<https://claphamparkcreative.org/portfolio/my-neighbours-keys/>

<https://claphamparkcreative.org/portfolio/my-neighbours-keys/#stories-about-neighbours>

Artistic Director – Stranger Tales 2017-18

The Stranger Tales was an Arts Council Project funded project I designed and directed. The project grew out of my ongoing work in arts and migration and my interest in hospitality and how it relates to arts practice as well as to attitudes to migration. I created a collection of stories through one-to-one conversation between me and members of the public in London and West Yorkshire. Once the stories had been transcribed, each story was illustrated by Candice Purwin, and shared as a gift to the storyteller. Each participant told the story of an encounter with a stranger or strangers from a different culture. About half of the storytellers were from refugee or migrant backgrounds. The stories were performed as an immersive performance, held around a meal table, as part of the London Literature Festival at the Southbank Centre and at the Platforma Festival in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 2017.

Why Did I wait So Long? (extract) by Huda



On 31 January 2007 I arrived in the UK, it was so cold and there was nothing green. I had some English words but I couldn't put them in sentences.

I settled in to my husband's house in Huddersfield but I found that my husband had no relationship with the neighbours. He'd been there for four years and he didn't know any of them. My husband is a very good man but he's a bit shy. I didn't like it that we didn't know our neighbours, in Baghdad we knew everybody up and down our street. In Islam it is important to treat your neighbours very, very well, we would take them food and gifts, especially during Ramadan.

So why did I wait 7 years to get to know my neighbours? Well, the first barrier is language. The second barrier for me was being worried about what the neighbours might think of me, the fear that maybe they would not like me because I'm a Muslim, they would have negative views of Islam and because of this they might ignore me. It's obvious I'm Muslim because of my clothes and my language.

Sometimes you get enthusiastic and then you lose it again, you think, I'm going to go and knock on their doors and then you lose the confidence. I kept encouraging myself to go and knock on my neighbours' doors, but then something always stopped me, I was afraid of rejection.

It was Ramadan in 2014 and I had made some special sweets call Mahalabi and I decided that I would give some to the nearest neighbours. I encouraged my husband to come with me and he said okay. You cannot believe how fast my heart was beating, I was so nervous, but I was also happy I was taking this step and I knew it should have been long before. We visited four or five of the nearest houses in the street and I said hello I am Huda, I am your neighbour and I have brought you some sweets that I have made. Everyone was really nice, so welcoming and happy to meet us.

After the first time I lost my confidence and I didn't knock on my neighbours' doors for a long time. Because of the media, there was a barrier of fear between us. Now that I have lived in the UK for a few years I have learnt that there is a media agenda to get people to hate Muslims. This is very upsetting for me.

A year later in 2015 my husband and I decided to buy two female pygmy goats. They were five months old and we really loved them, especially my husband. It was just after Ramadan again so I thought I'd use the goats as an excuse to invite some people to come over for coffee. I had written some invitations and chosen some very special paper and envelopes that were red on the outside and lined with stripes. They said dear neighbour, I'm Huda, I would love it if the women and children of your house would come and have a cup of tea with me.

Once again my husband and I began knocking on doors and at each house we would pass them the envelope. Almost everyone said yes we would love to come. One man said have you met my wife? She was ill and couldn't come to the door, so he invited us in to meet her. She was so nice to me, she kissed my hand. We knocked on one of our neighbour's doors and he also insisted on inviting us in and showing us his new kitchen. We were so surprised they were so welcoming. One of the women I met that day has become a very good friend since.

Nearly everybody came to the tea party, all my English neighbours, about six people and I invited my college tutor too. I like my neighbours so much, they are so kind, they bring food to feed the goats. I have now had two or three coffee mornings and my husband and I attended a street party.

I regret all the years that passed without knowing my neighbours.

Artist in Residence, idle women, 2017

idle women is an arts and social justice project that focuses on creating spaces for women on the margins. It includes an artist-in-residence programme where women artists live and work on a canal boat, fostering creativity and community engagement.

As part of my artist residency, I built partnerships with Women Centre, in Dewsbury and the Greenwood Centre, in Ravensthorpe. I set up a women's creative group in each setting. At Women Centre I worked with groups of women who live apart from their children and at Greenwood Centre with South Asian mothers. I also ran a weekly 'Open Boat' drop in workshop for local women and hosted an International Women's Day gathering.

Most of the women I worked with had past experiences of trauma or of exclusion and I prioritised Trauma Informed and co-created approaches.

The women experimented with many different creative approaches; they wrote poems on rolled up scrolls and on the sails of handmade boats, which we launched on the river; they wrote their hopes for future women in world on blow-up globes; they made wire sculptures including a life size woman, who was part of an installation and soundscape, shared with stakeholders at Women Centre.

