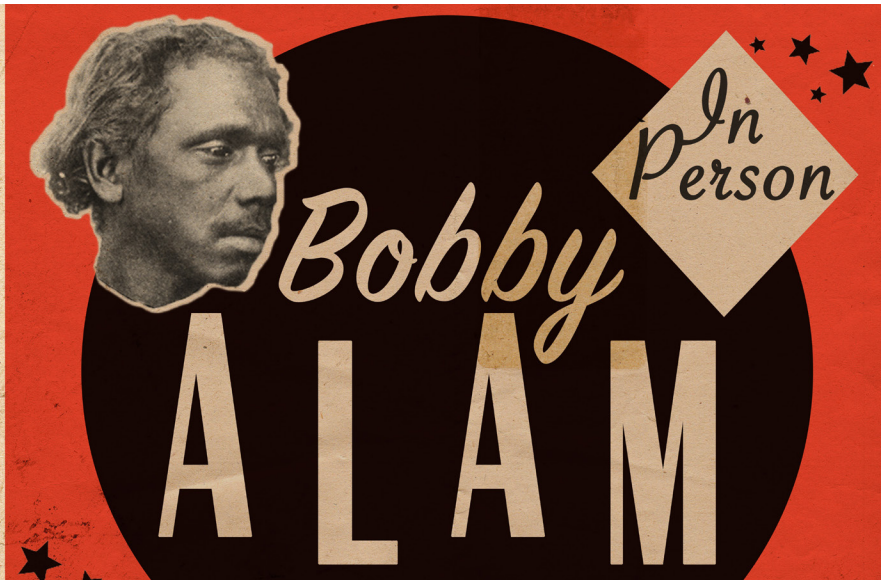


For Immediate Release

***Pigeonhole: The Life and Work of Bobby Alam***

June 29 - August 18, 2019

**Opening Reception:** Saturday June 29, 6 - 9pm



*Pigeonhole*, 2019. Bobby Alam Concert Poster. Detail.

Knockdown Center is pleased to present ***Pigeonhole: The Life and Work of Bobby Alam***, a new exhibition by **Priyanka Dasgupta and Chad Marshall** on view from June 29 - August 18, 2019. *Pigeonhole* is a multidisciplinary portrait of Bahauddin “Bobby” Alam, a Bengali peddler and sailor who arrived in the United States in 1918 and lived as a Black jazz musician in New York and New Orleans. The exhibition memorializes Alam’s career and explores his personal navigation of an especially precarious period in American history, prompting a reflection on the complexities of racial passing as a means for marginalized people to circumvent violence.

To pigeonhole someone is to assign them to a restrictive category that flattens out the complexities of identity, typically based on stereotypes. Through a purposeful selection of memorabilia that builds Alam’s identity, in addition to multiple layers of “pigeon coop” structures within the installation, the exhibition engages with aspects of stereotyping that Alam was subject to, ultimately bringing into focus the ways in which he escapes one pigeonhole by inhabiting another.

Alam is a composite of historical realities and imagined truths. His persona is culled from the unwritten experiences of Bengali sailors who passed as Black in the early twentieth century, settling into communities of color in order to bypass anti-Asian immigration laws in the United States. The artists deploy these histories to bring to light the ways in which passing can function as a strategy for survival.

The installation portrays Alam’s dressing room, rehearsal space, and performance stage in the kind of backroads juke joint where he would have spent his evenings constructing and performing his adopted identity. The space is composed of wooden pallets and corrugated metal – materials reminiscent of early twentieth century juke joints that also echo Knockdown Center’s own architecture. Objects within the installation highlight Alam’s life and career as a musician: a zoot suit embellished with Indian kantha-style embroidery, old handbills and concert posters, musical com-

positions, video documentation from Alam's rehearsals, and private recordings. Clues within each of these objects reveal, upon close reading, the staged and dual nature of Alam's identity, which subtly trespasses the lines between reality and fiction. As a whole, the installation draws parallels between the performative aspects of his life and career, and the invisible and visible forces that influence and define identity, illuminating the constructed nature of racial (and other identitarian) categories.

As with much of Dasgupta and Marshall's work, *Pigeonhole* is also informed by the complexities of the artists' own transcultural reality, and is grounded in their desire to uncover shared histories. The exhibition further considers the role of the contemporary diasporic artist in attending to these neglected narratives and disrupting binary-driven distinctions within societal norms and stereotypical expectations.

Over the course of the exhibition, contemporary musicians inspired by Alam will take the stage and perform live, enabling the past evoked by the installation to live once again, while resonating with Knockdown Center's function as a music venue. Additional elements of the exhibition will extend into Knockdown Center's outdoor spaces, restrooms, and bar.

## **About Artists**

Priyanka Dasgupta and Chad Marshall began collaborating in 2015. Their work is located in the gaps between history and story-telling, and draws from archival texts, sociological conventions, oral histories, postmodern theory and postcolonial studies, to examine power and privilege in the United States, and its relationship with image, and appearance. Exhibitions of their collaborative work include *Pigeonhole*, Dodd Galleries, University of Georgia (2019), *Sunroom Project Space: Paradise*, at Wave Hill, New York (2018), *How to see in the dark*, at Cuchifritos Gallery, New York (2018), *Not an edge but a hinge*, at Abrons Arts Center, New York (2018), *In Practice: Another Echo* at Sculpture Center, New York (2018), *Loving Blackness and A More Perfect Union* at the Asian Arts Initiative, Philadelphia (2017), *Ornate Activate* at the Villa Terrace Decorative Arts Museum, Milwaukee (2017) and Shirin Gallery, New York (2015). Residencies include the Artist Studio Program at Smack Mellon (2018) and AIRspace at Abrons Arts Center (2018).

This exhibition is organized by Alexis Wilkinson, Knockdown Center Director of Exhibitions and Live Art.

## **About Knockdown Center**

Knockdown Center gallery hours are Thursday and Friday from 5 PM to 9 PM, Saturday and Sunday from 2 PM to 8 PM. Knockdown Center is located at 52-19 Flushing Ave, Maspeth, NY 11378.

Featuring programming of diverse formats and media, Knockdown Center aims to create a radically cross-disciplinary environment. The particularity of our architectural environment and history leads us to gravitate toward projects that demonstrate a sensitive reactivity to site and environment.

## **Press Inquiries**

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