

‘So you wanna make this movie with me?’ says Khalik Allah, talking to his girlfriend Camilla at the start of his third feature *IWOW* (2020). ‘It’ll be a simple movie, just everyday stuff.’ Having worked with Beyoncé on *Lemonade* (2016) then travelled to Jamaica and back for his second feature *Black Mother* (2018), the filmmaker here returns to more familiar territory. The majority of *IWOW* was shot on the same corner of Harlem where he made his first feature *Field Niggas* (2015), the place where he’s spent much of the last decade refining his photographic practice.

Though Allah has been using video since he was 14, his films feel like those of a photographer. Sound is usually asynchronous to the images; the focus, foremost, is on portraiture. In interviews, Allah has referenced studying some of the greats of social realist street photography – Henri Cartier-Bresson, William Klein, William Eggleston – before realising that their work didn’t represent his experience. To produce something that did, he realised that he would have to follow his own path: shooting where he wasn’t supposed to, in ways he had been advised against using. A candid approach would never work. To make real portraits, he’d have to talk with people – or, better still, get to know them.

So he looks and listens, stitching together what he finds. Polyphonic and polyvalent, Allah’s films feature a plurality of voices, but *IWOW* has two that tether it. First is Frenchie, a homeless Haitian man with whom the filmmaker has been working for years. Acting, as Allah does, as both participant and spectator, Frenchie serves as a sort of gravitational force from which the film orbits outwards. ‘I want you to be a broadcaster,’ Allah tells him. ‘People want to hear from you.’ Speaking less himself, Allah instead asks a cast of friends and strangers for their opinions on life, love and faith, ‘broadcasting’ their feelings about this world and the next in the form of a three-hour aural-visual collage that channels their thoughts through Allah’s own unique aesthetic approach and lyrical perspective.

Shot on a mixture of film formats and stocks, Allah’s films are always exquisitely beautiful, displaying his affinity for capturing the dramatic qualities of light as it lands on (usually black) faces and (generally urban) surfaces. But with *IWOW*, Allah also displays a newfound vulnerability. Take, for instance, the scene where his mother challenges his choices and beliefs, using his given name rather than the one he has chosen. Or the one where his girlfriend upends his worldview, questioning the literal ways in which he sees the world. Having made his life all about looking, Allah finds himself being told that he can’t even see what lies right in front of him. The prominence of Camilla, the second key voice, makes implicit what Allah’s films have always suggested: his camera isn’t just a tool for seeing but for listening (and hopefully learning) too; a way of letting others in. A diary film like few others, *IWOW* might seem simple, but under the surface is anything but.

*Matt Turner is a writer and film programmer.*