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Art & Photography / Lightbox

## **This photo book challenges how we think about 'mixed' identity**

**In a time increasingly concerned with definitive categories, Norwegian-Indian artist Dev Dhunsi delves into the concept of 'mixedness'**



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The concept of fluidity underscores several aspects of the artist and photographer Dev Dhunsi's new photo book, *Mixed*. Published by MACK and Self Publish Be Happy (SPBH), the book is a meditation on what identity could look like when language fails it, materialising as a kaleidoscopic project in colour, photographic genre, and thematic scope. From one page to the next, one can expect to flit from myth to documentary, from archive to text that mimics a screenplay. In one image, a model covered in jewellery poses against a tangerine-hued backdrop; in another, a self-portrait of the artist as the Hindu goddess Kali and a few pages later, a tonally inverted photograph of a bookshelf. "The term mixed isn't just fixed to this idea of racial identity. I wanted to use this concept of 'mixedness' as a method," Dhunsi explains in a conversation over Zoom. "There are all sorts of genres of photography within the book, which might make a critic confused. It has lots of text. It's not just documentary or portraiture photography; it includes archival elements. I wanted the premise of 'mixed' to go beyond the book's thematic aspects."

The book was conceived as a result of the Nordic Photobook Award, which the photographer saw as a means to create something he couldn't fulfil on his own. "I sat down and imagined what I would do with the opportunity, and instead of applying with an established body of work or my portfolio, I proposed a project just with text," Dhunsi explains. "It didn't make sense for me to apply to the award with something that already has a life. I wanted this book to feel completely new."



In the initial stages of the project, Dhunsi was curious to examine his own family and roots in Scandinavia. "My family moved to Norway in the 80s and 90s, which was a significant period of migration into Norway. My cousins are from Algeria, from Morocco, from Argentina. My own heritage is in India, and I guess we are now groups that are supposedly going to have nationalist feelings towards Norway, but struggle with it. I wanted to explore that tension of being from different places." The text he was working with at the time was titled *Fatherland*, a homage to his father's Indian heritage. "I initially wanted to travel to all the countries my family are from with them and work with the geographical differences between those places," Dhunsi explains. "I hoped that I would learn more about them outside the context of Norway through that experience, but the project ended up being way too ambitious."

To fulfil the thematic ambitions of *Mixed*, which are primarily concerned with ideas of identity and visibility in an era obsessed with definitive categories and purity, Dhunsi had to give up some level of artistic control as a photographer, intentionally lean into the lack of direction and allow the images in the book to be visually influenced by the conversations he had with his subjects instead. "It opened up the way I was able to work with people and create images. By talking to me about their own cultural heritage and how they felt like representing themselves, I was able to open up my own references and expand the kind of images I was making," he says, noting how this process allowed him to access spaces and moments he wouldn't have been able to otherwise. "Our hybrid identities function similarly to being queer in how they teach us to adapt to different rooms and spaces. You can cross a lot of borders and access moments that are unique and exciting. I think that sense of excitement really comes through in the book."

In the book, Dhunsi's staged and documentary photographs of his subjects and the physical world around them sit alongside material from The State Institute for Racial Biology in Sweden, which shuttered in 1959 and housed documents and photographic material relating to racial biology and eugenics. "I wanted to include this archival material as a backstory for

the project, but I also wanted to emphasise that this racial archive is totally different to my way of working. They were violently capturing their subjects, stripping them naked, and measuring them. They didn't include any names to identify any of the people in the archive, which is why it was so important for me to truthfully represent everyone in *Mixed* and include a thank you page where all their names are listed.”



Dhunsi's photo book is accompanied by a show at the Nitja Centre for Contemporary Art in Norway titled *Unmistakably You*, which extends the book's themes into the material world. "I decided none of my photos would touch or hang freely on the wall. I didn't want to neutralise these portraits or treat them as objects, as something one can theoretically buy and bring home. Instead, I printed one selection of photographs on textiles and stretched them out on canvas stretchers, and another series of works is on tapestry. The archive images on display are embedded into the wall so it looks like someone has ripped up the wall to expose the images," Dhunsi tells Dazed. For him, the physical space becomes another site of inquiry – much like the photo book itself – one that resists the urge to neutralise, label or neatly contain, an examination through medium and method of how limiting traditional modes of presenting and categorising photographs are.

*Mixed* (SPBH Editions, 2026) by Dev Dhunsi is published by MACK. *Unmistakably You* is now open at Nitja Centre for Contemporary Art, Norway, until 26 April 2026.

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