

A
Reflective Essay
from a und'rgraduate
singap'rean
in
London

In the year of the Common Era
2024
The 58th year of our republick

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An introduction

Seeing a country, warts and all

Unlike any other nation, the United Kingdom has always had a hold in my imagination. My parents started their family at Princess Elizabeth's estate, named after the then-Princess Elizabeth. Part of my childhood was watching Mr Bean. My family is a Manchester United family, living off the glory days of Sir Alex. My formative understanding of politics and Satire was from Yes Minister and The Thick of It, and of course, I met His Majesty the King when he visited the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) in 2017.

Thus, coming to this country has been a lifelong dream, but unlike some ardent Anglophiles, it is one knowing how badly the country and, consequently, the city have been run. Parts of the city are run down, with trash everywhere in some areas and emergency services rushing around the streets all the time. Theft and muggings are common, and the high bar of safety we'd enjoyed back in Singapore is preciously few on the streets of London.

This, of course, stems from a long-standing mismanagement of the country, from a government that has increasingly been preoccupied with politicking amongst each other rather than governing the country. This housing crisis has laid waste to the dreams of many of finding not just a decent home but sometimes merely a place of shelter, etc. My awareness of these facts was ultimately valuable when I researched the brief.



From admiring the grandeur of Westminster Palace...

To ending up getting pickpocketed right after that picture was taken.

Regardless of that, London is alive.

The city is alive in every sense of the word. The streets are rich in architecture, from old Hanoverian buildings that have seen the ravages of wars and pestilence to the gleaming skyscrapers reaching towards the sky like the tower of Babylon. Every other inch of the city, especially the old quarters, is detailed. Every other lamp post, drainage, and wall is chock full of a design motif or another, either representative of the borough, city or some historical association of the place.

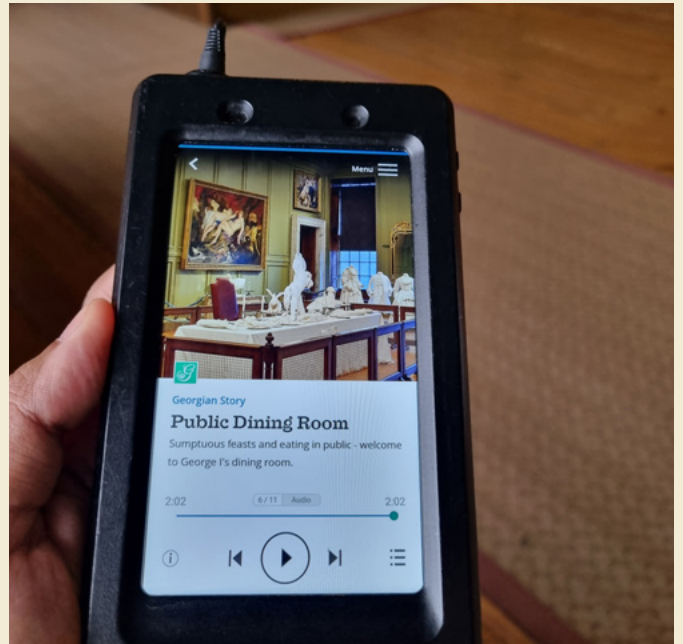
I still recall visiting parts of the City of London and marvelling at how every lamppost had to have the coat of arms of the city craved into it, how every corner of the Westminster Palace (Houses of Parliament) has a motif either on the walls or on the floors, all part of the overall richness that is designed to imbue us mortals with a sense of purpose and reason, to both awe and inspire.

The artistic scene in this country, too, seems much more alive and varied compared to back home. Theatres, galleries, and other cultural institutions exist within a rich ecosystem that encourages artistic expression through sheer volume, diversity, and uniqueness.

I thoroughly enjoyed visiting the museums, from the Imperial War Museums to the National Portrait Gallery to Hampton Court Palace and Windsor Palace. I was able to see not just sights and beautiful scenery but also design in every form of action, from how information is delivered to us in a hierarchy that makes sense from their perspective to design meant to invoke a sense of prestige and history, to overawe us mere mortals.



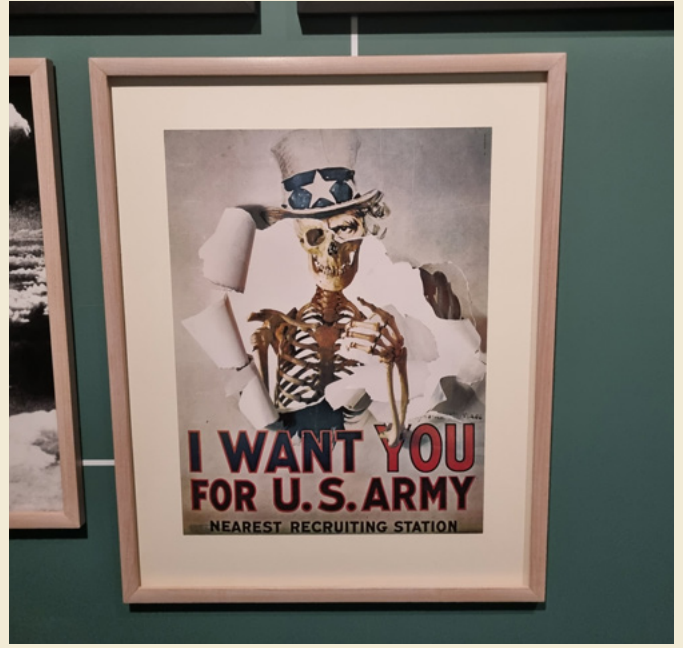
The King's Staircase at Hampton Court: The landings were much lower by design to allow a more stately procession during ceremonies.



Audio and assistive visual guides were provided not only to supplement the historical tour with more in-depth commentary but also encourages visitors to conduct their own journey.



Design is everywhere: The Coat of Arms of Queen Victoria and her husband, Prince Albert at Westminster Bridge.



It may be an Imperial War Museum, but it does not shy away from critiquing conflicts and how some people view war.



Museums like HMS Belfast is very encouraging of visitors to touch and feel the environment of the place, allowing a much more human understanding about conditions of the ship.



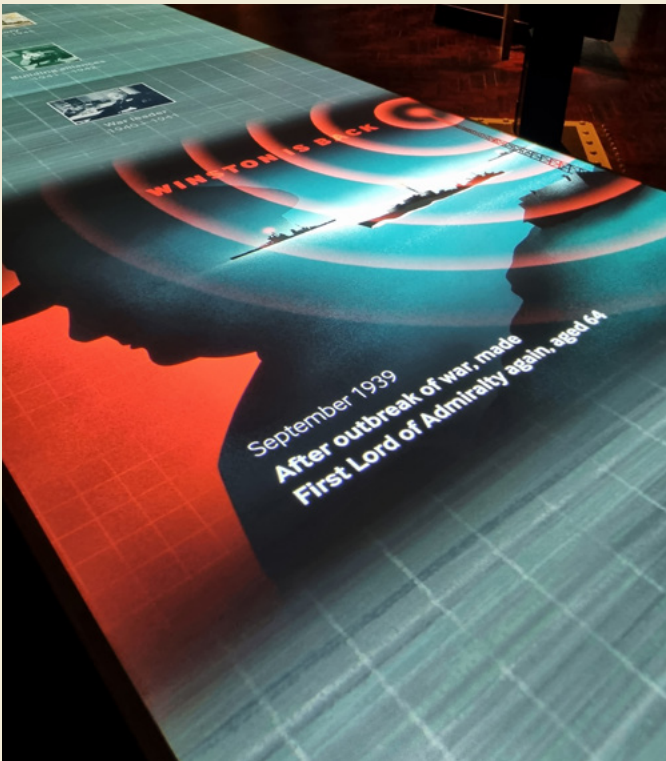
The Parthenon Gallery is very awe inspiring, using its artifacts and spatial architecture to invoke history and grandeur, which still works despite the crowds.



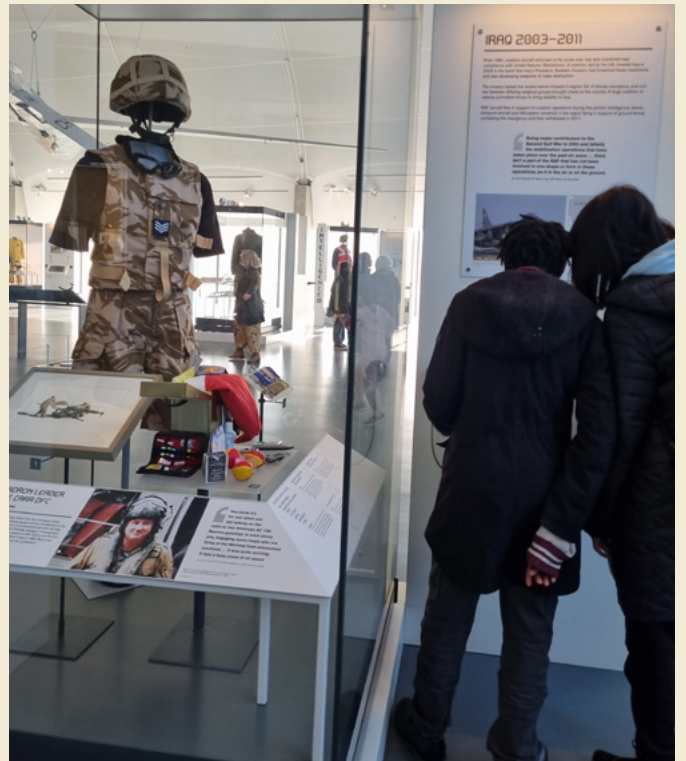
Heraldry is everywhere in the United Kingdom: Tudor rose and the Arms of the United Kingdom at Hampton Court.



Even in dustbins: Coat of Arms of the City of Westminster borough near the Tate Britain.



Display the Churchill War Room: Using a portrait format and illustration to encourage visitors to move along the gallery whilst providing a simple historical summary.



Seeing museums in action: Seeing young people being inspired and engaged with displays is a reminder of the importance of good design.

Chapter I:

Taking advantage of the UeAL Colleges

I was designated to attend Camberwell College, a quaint campus south of London near Peckham. I most highly enjoyed the oasis of artistic energy that the campus nurtured, and the studio-esque environment in the section of the school I was designated to was very helpful in that regard.

It was a challenge at first, adjusting as the systems and culture of the campus and the university differ significantly compared to what I am familiar with. However, I adjusted myself accordingly to the environment through the help of my peers and the teaching staff at hand.

The facilities and resources that the colleges afforded students like me were also very beneficial. Their extensive library collections spread across the college were very valuable to furthering my understanding of the subject matter of my brief and for my self-directed learning.

Beyond my main campus, I have also visited other campuses, such as UAL London College of Communications and UAL Central Saint Martin, to further explore their facilities and obtain books essential to my research.



Camberwell College on a more brighter day.



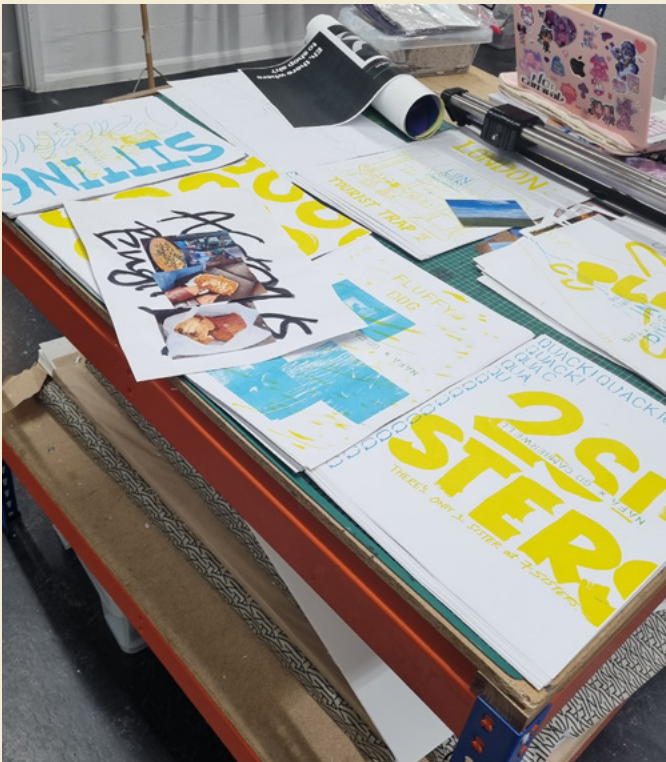
Camberwell College library during our orientation.

Chapter I.I:

Risography

As someone who has yet to dabble in risograph personally, I found it an opportunity not just to study the machinal operations of the risograph machine but also to learn the process of creation through experimentation. We combined images that we had taken throughout our exchange trip in London with typographic pictures of our creation, creating a completely unique work.

Combined with the compilation of our final works produced for our unit module, it is a remarkable work that I am proud to have helped create, and definitely spark a curiosity within me to continue experimenting and try out risography back home.



From production, using ink and pictures...



To final production.

Chapter II:

Home is not a place: Understanding the issues at hand

I have often considered myself a person of the left, with a strong desire for change and improvement in the lives of the common people and their living environments.

Having been born with a blurred sense of borders (Having parents of different nationalities, does that you), I also took an interest in politics in countries other than my own, such as Malaysia and the United Kingdom.

Was it a manifestation of my Anglophilia? Was it general boredom as the rather tepid state and somewhat closed-off nature of politics in Singapore? One wonders.

But on receipt of the brief, my mind wondered about the state of housing in general of the United Kingdom, with the nature of the current state of crisis coming from so many factors such as the general economic malaise, poor governance by the incumbent government for the past decade, to the lack of supply towards new homes in areas of the UK that needs it, all turning into a snowball effect that affects everyone, especially the marginalised and disadvantaged.

This, combined with the migrant crisis that the UK has been undergoing, founded by extremists that seek political gains from discord and marginalisation, creates a hurricane of conditions that discriminate heavily towards migrants seeking their basic right of housing.

The examples given to us were also interesting as they gave me insights on how to move forward in the projects.

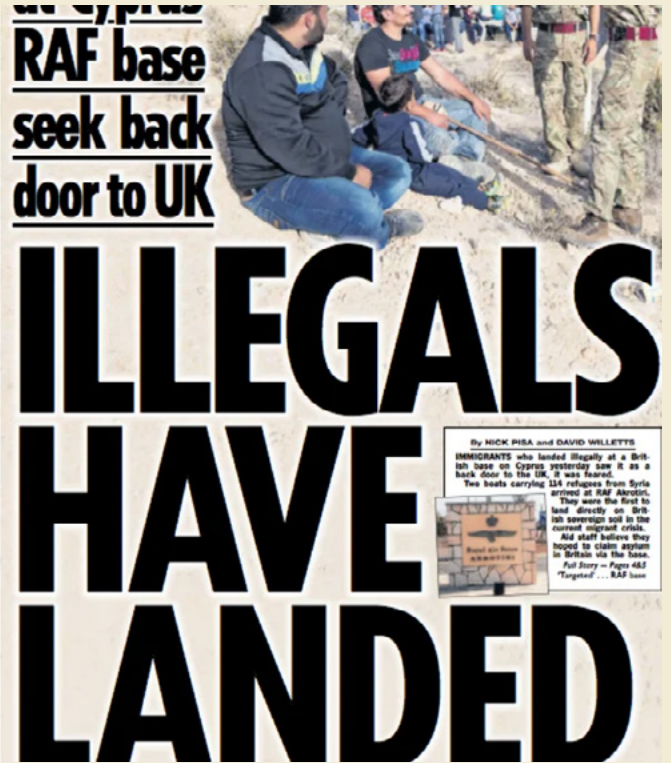
One of them was Friedrich Mueller: From the project Lockdown Diaries, whose documentation was pretty unique in terms of approach, using images to talk about and document the struggles of housing here, whose own personal experiences of expectations and disappointments are also reflected in my own experiences finding accommodations here.

The Migrant Journal was also another highlight for me. Despite what some might say that it is a conventional, safe, or worse, static way to talk about migrant issues and their impact on the world around them, it is invaluable for documentation of their experiences, thoughts, and imagination to exist, be it in physical form like the migrant journal or possibly digital.

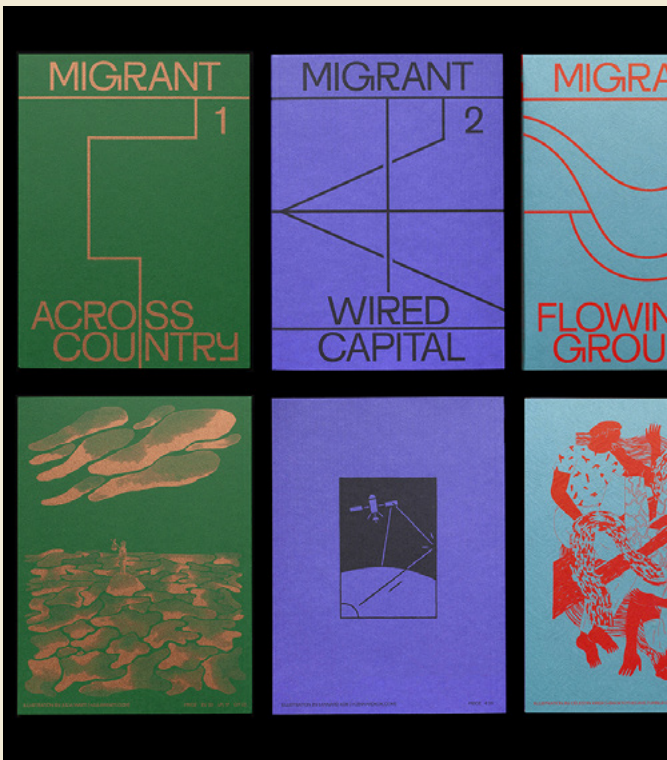
Thus, I have an idea, a pole star for me to ponder upon and seek, as a form of publication, which I had never done before, to discuss and elaborate my thoughts, opinions and feelings on the subject matter at hand.



The Grenfell fire tragedy and the subsequent investigation made me realise how the poor and marginalised can be screwed over in their own homes.



Headlines like this fuels discrimination against migrants of all kinds not just seeking a simple abode but others.



The migrant journal was an interesting concept that I'd explore further in terms of publication.



"A West Indian in England" by two Jamaican immigrants commissioned by the Central Office of Information, inspired me heavily.

Chapter III:

Visiting the Museum of the Home: Observations and findings

The Museum of the Home was surprisingly pleasant to visit and explore.

As I had never heard of the museum before, I kept an open mind when approaching it. Despite being unable to view some of its more exciting parts, I gained invaluable insights into the advancement of my project.

I have always believed in finding commonalities and similarities among us, be it physical or metaphorical. I do believe that there are common impulses that drive us, even if we end up going in different directions.

We ended up mainly seeing a line of exhibitions that detailed the evolution of what can be considered an English middle-class home from the 17th to 19th century, which in some eyes would regard them as having lives that are separate and alien from us, not just by distance of time but also by social stature and sensibilities.

However, I would digress from such an opinion: There is an alignment layered underneath, the seeking of warmth, connections and something personal within their living space, even as they chase social approval and validation.

Even as they sought the exotic, followed trends, and sought expensive items to decorate their interiors, there's still something homily about them that echoes today.

The museum's collections tell me that homes in the UK, especially those of a certain social strata, have this dual role that might conflict with each other. As a sign of social upbringing and status, homes often pocket the latest interior fashions in a somewhat Sisyphean attempt to keep up with the Joneses.

A hunch I have about the nature of society and class in the UK is that an element of this remains embedded and manifests itself in how some view and decorate their homes.

Of the items that inspired me the most were the imported Chinese plates and the Wedgewood plates.

It showed me the dual aspect of class and homeliness at work. It must be a pleasure for those owners to have something that is both practical and of immense value to them, a piece that may be considered typical today. Most importantly, it pointed me towards a truth that I may seek to pick up upon: Home is what we impart ourselves into. It's about the little items of joy, of what we want to be seen with or use.



These plug are definitely the same type to the ones that I saw in my late grandma's house up in the hills in Malaysia.



There's a commonality that strikes me, between these embroidery samplers, used as practice to learn embroidery, to us using tutorials to practice our own hobbies.



I shudder at the thought that someone putting up so much money into a new wallpaper for their house only to be told the colours are no longer in fashion.



The backs of an empire was started what today could easily be brought for a few pounds at the local shop.

Chapter IV:

Home is not a place: Research & Presentation

After initial consultations with lecturers on the subject matter, I decided to focus my energy towards advocacy for international students, reading up on the challenges and issues they faced finding a home within the British Isles.

I narrowed down my focus towards homesickness, analysing the cause, symptoms, effects and coping methods needed for students.

From there, I also analysed my fellow Singaporeans' situation, from the reasons they chose the UK for their studies to the distribution of students within these islands.

I expanded my research focus to Malaysian students, partly to explore possibilities of involving them and my connections with some of them.

I also analysed the support structures and community that these students have, both within students themselves, such as local student societies, and within the wider community of Singaporeans living here.

Key findings:

70%

Of Students studying in the UK suffers from Homesick at one point.

2.3

Thousand students from Singapore enrol into UK universities every year.
Source: UK Census 2021

41

Partner Singaporean student societies in the UK.
Source: (<https://www.theukssc.co.uk/partner-societies>)

Chapter IV.I:

Home is not a place: Conclusion from feedbacks

I decided, with the lecturers' concurrence, to advance forward and create a publication platform for international students for Singaporeans named Koel, after an iconic common bird in the nation. It shall serve both digitally and physically, aiming to assist and give a voice to students, both in the UK and students preparing to move into the country.



Part of the research materials that I went through.

Chapter V:

Home is not a place: Development to the final product

After the presentation and feedback from my colleagues and lecturers, I decided to focus on creating the final product.

On the advice and by time constraints, the final viewable product would be a booklet as part of a series aimed towards prospective A-Level students who may have aspirations to further their education in the United Kingdom.

I drafted several topics, using the information I gathered such as Facebook groups, Reddit posts and other guidebooks as a reference for my draft series.

Within the series, it would be:

Creating a Home I: Finding your home (Focusing on accommodation searching)

Creating a Home II: Prepping for travel liao
(Focusing on what to prepare before departure)

Creating a Home III: Safety first bro
(Focusing on safety and emergencies)

Creating a Home IV: Making your own makan
(Focusing on shopping for groceries)

Creating a Home V: Finding your lepak mates
(Focusing on finding friends)

The focus on the presentable material would be on groceries and practical help that may be vital in helping incoming Singaporean students prepare and adjust to life in the United Kingdom.

These booklets would exist both digitally and physically. They would be handed out at physical events like fairs and talks and available in digital format for easy access.

The first element I focused upon was the creation of the branding and style for the booklets; from this, I was Inspired by the classic design style for Penguin Books, primarily the style established by Jan Tschichold

I dived deep into understanding the typography and design elements used within Penguin, referencing several books regarding the design and covers of Penguin and Pelican books over the years.

From there, I started creating a book cover inspired by the geometric cover designed by Henning Boehlke for Penguin and the logos of supermarket brands in the UK. I used their respective design cues to create the cover.

The font I used for the cover and content is Neue Haas Grotesk. Some may consider it conventional and safe, but as my focus is on delivering information from an authority standpoint, I decided to use it to establish rapport.

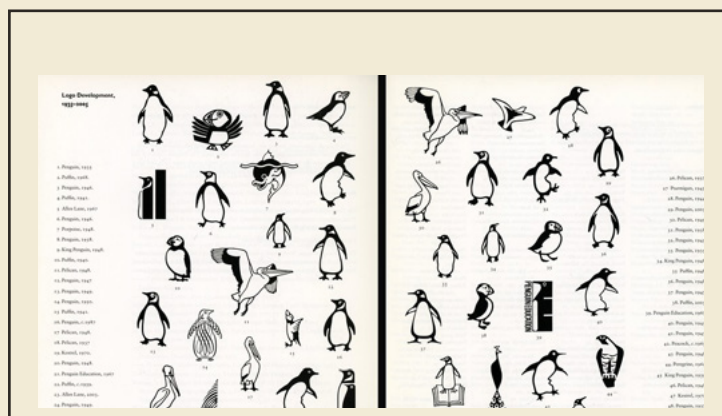
The layout was a challenge, but I got it through advice from my lecturer and inspiration from established sources such as Monocle, whose layout inspired me to create the final layout process for my booklet.



An early iteration of the Koel logo, taking inspiration from the bird whose iconic sound permeates the Singapore soundscape every morning.



The final logo is an illustration of a Koel bird, modelled after the Penguin iconic logo with my own subtle style.



An inspiration for me was the Penguin and Pelican books logo and the ethos behind it.



The Penguin book cover grid designed by Romek Marber was very inspirational to my design.



Using UK supermarket logo brand elements and turning them into part of the cover was taken from the Penguin book styles in the 70s and many praised its interesting take.



Mockup of the final product.

Final reflections

Moving forwards...

London has been a monumental journey for me, and I believe for many of my comrades in arms as well, as I was exposed to a new environment, both physically and emotionally and psychologically.

From fending for ourselves to navigating an entirely new learning system and creative freedom, we have learned much for ourselves in this journey. Many of us took our own unique paths on this journey, and I believe myself to be amongst those, unchained by the four walls of the classroom, soaking ourselves into the wider world and gaining much-needed perspectives on not just the creative and artistic world but also ourselves.

Special mention has to be accorded to the teaching staff and lecturers of my unit, whose spirit, passion and guidance have given me much confidence in myself and my work.

Building upon what I have learnt, both inside and outside the campus of Camberwell College, would be the next challenge that I have to take upon myself, and one that I look forward to most as I move forward on the following path of my journey.



John Singer Sargent's 'Gassed': The last painting I saw in London.