

HYPERALLERGIC

ART

Visions of Home that Are Gut-Wrenching, Contemplative, and Funny

In *Homelands*, artists variously characterize home as “a transient dwelling,” “an ongoing process,” and “other people.”



Naomi Polonsky December 24, 2019



Sohrab Hura, from the work *Snow* (2014-ongoing), 24 x 24 in. (courtesy of Sohrab Hura / Experimenter)

CAMBRIDGE, England — A museum exhibition in the UK dedicated to contemporary South Asian art is a rare thing. Although London’s Victoria and Albert Museum has one of the largest collections of South Asian art in the world, amassed during the time of the British Empire, few of the works were made after the British colonies in the region gained their independence. The current political tensions in South Asia mean that

contemporary artists often do not gain the international exposure and

recognition they deserve, nor do many of them have full freedom of expression. The current exhibition at Kettle's Yard in Cambridge, Homelands: Art from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, therefore, is a timely undertaking.

It is also a difficult undertaking. The main challenge of organizing such an exhibition is finding a way to convey the political and cultural context of the artworks, while also allowing them to speak for themselves. In this elegantly curated show the balance feels exactly right. The theme directly confronts the realities of “violence and dislocation” that, in her introduction to the exhibition catalogue, curator Devika Singh describes as “constitutive experiences of modern South Asia.” “Homeland” is a fraught notion in countries still recovering from the 1947 Partition of India and Pakistan (which uprooted 12 million people) and the Bangladesh Liberation War of 1971 (which displaced 9.5 million). The exhibition's 11 artists, working in media ranging from painting to performance, explore the theme in a host of different ways that are by turns gut-wrenching, contemplative, quaint, and funny.



Homelands: Art from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, Kettle's Yard, University of Cambridge, 2019 (photo by Stephen White)



Bani Abidi, “The News” (2001), video still (courtesy of the artist)

Shilpa Gupta's contributions are perhaps the most sobering. “Untitled” (2008-9), an old-fashioned announcement board resembling those in a train station, displays a continuous stream of messages, commands, and statistics. The commandment “THOU SHALT NOT KILL” appears at one point, followed by the death toll from recent mass killings. “Blame” (2002), also by Gupta, is a poster depicting a bright-red fire extinguisher bearing the word “blame.” It was created as part of a 2002 project in which 10 artists from India and Pakistan (then, as now, in conflict over the region of Kashmir) emailed images to each other



Nikhil Chopra, “Yog Raj Chitrakar: Memory Drawing X (Part I, 14:00)” (2010), photographic print, 23.5 x 35.25 in. Costumes: Loise Braganza. Photography: Shivani Gupta and Vinita Agarwal (image courtesy Nikhil Chopra and Chatterjee & Lal)

for pacifist posters that they pasted along the streets of Karachi and Mumbai; as a result, the artists were accused of terrorist activity.

Next to Gupta’s poster is Munem Wasif’s quietly devastating photographic series *Spring Song* (2019), which documents the belongings of Rohingya refugees living in camps in Southern Bangladesh. Photographed individually against monochromatic backgrounds, these mundane objects — a cell phone, a toy, a bottle of skin lotion — take on

monumental significance. The people they belong to remain absent.



Homelands: Art from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, Kettle’s Yard, University of Cambridge, 2019 (photo by Stephen White)

Desmond Lazaro also focuses in on the sentimental value of personal belongings and heirlooms, yet in a more personal and lighthearted way. Lazaro’s parents emigrated to the UK from Burma; though the artist grew up in the suburbs of Leeds, he retained a strong sense of his diasporic identity. His *Cini Films* series (2015-16), based on snapshots from his childhood — for instance, a family outing to London’s Victoria Memorial, a vase filled with his

mother’s roses — provides a glimpse into the individual, personal narratives that don’t make it into news stories and history books. The drawings recreate the blurriness, wonkiness, and accidental cropping of home video footage, gently mocking this amateur art form.

There are other moments humor in the exhibition. In Bani Abidi’s video



Yasmin Jahan Nupur, *Home* (2019), Single channel video. Video editing: Shahria shaon, camera/s: Manir mrittik (photo by Manir Mrittik, courtesy of Yasmin Jahan Nupur)

diptych “The News” (2001), two TV anchors deliver the same absurd news bulletin about an incident involving the theft of an egg. One anchor is dressed in an Indian *saree* and speaks Hindi, while the other wears a Pakistani *dupatta* and speaks Urdu. Both roles are performed identically by the artist herself, illustrating what the postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha terms the “nearness of difference.” Also included in the exhibition are three of Iftikhar Dadi and Elizabeth Dadi’s

spectacular neon sculptures of national flowers from the artists’ ongoing *Efflorescence* series, which pokes fun at the hyperbole of patriotic pageantry.



Munem Wasif, “Spring Song” (2019), Archival Pigment Print, from a series of 16 works (courtesy of Munem Wasif and Project 88. This project was partially supported by NTU CCA Singapore)

In this richly polyphonic exhibition, there is no single unifying approach, and no single definition of “home.” The artists variously characterize it, in interviews in the catalogue, as “a transient dwelling,” “an ongoing process,” and “other people.” Their works are sure to make visitors reflect on their own definition of it.

Homelands: Art from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan continues at Kettle’s Yard (University of Cambridge, Castle St., Cambridge, UK) through February 2. *The*

exhibition was curated by Devika Singh with Amy Tobin and Grace Storey.