

EFFLORESCENCE

Iftikhar Dadi

Seamróg (detail), from the series *Efflorescence*, 2012

(Opposite)

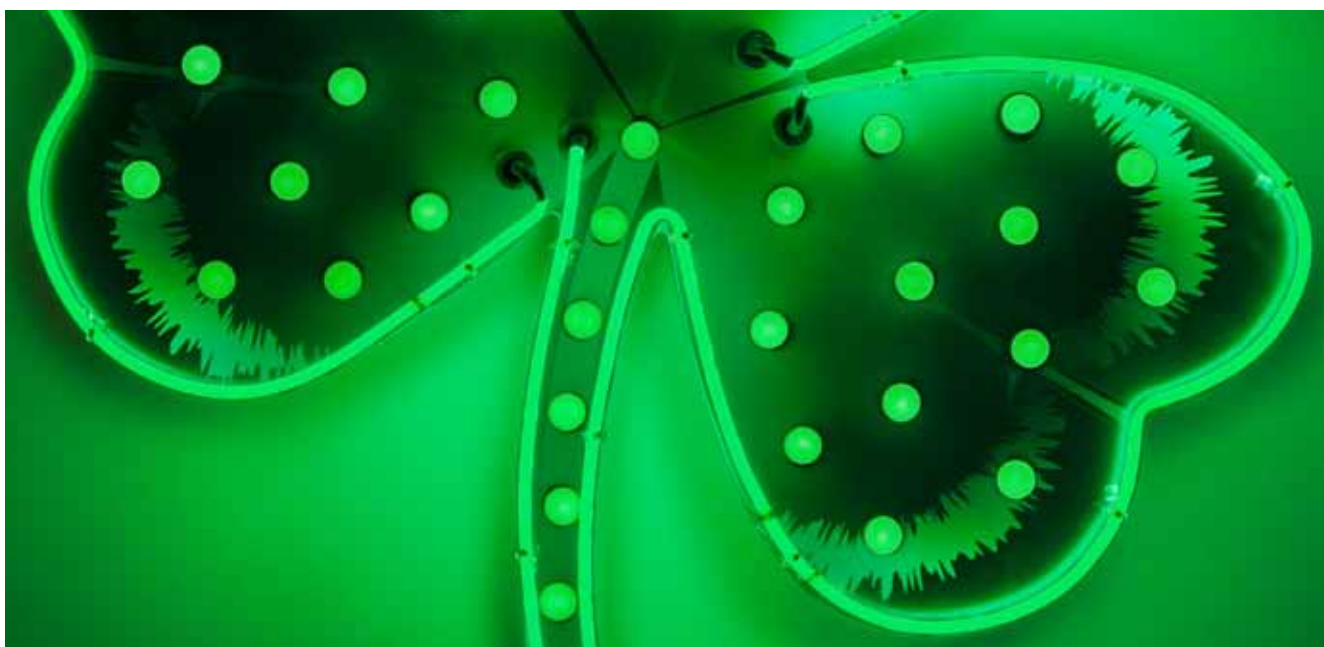
Growing up in Karachi during the 1960s and 1970s in a family with parents who had both migrated from India after the 1947 Partition of colonial India into the independent nation-states of India and Pakistan, I grew up with many recollections of a familial and social life that was intangible and distant to our life in Pakistan. My mother's family, which had been based in Lucknow and Bareilly in Uttar Pradesh, consisted of doctors and civil servants that the Aligarh University had produced for a couple of generations. They were deeply invested in Urdu language and literature. My father's immediate family was based in Bombay, but the extended family was from the small town of Godhra in Gujarat. Numerous members of this Gujarati-speaking community had migrated to Karachi, formed an elaborate labyrinth linked by intermarriage, and were primarily involved in business activities. Even after 1947, however, some members of both sides of my family also remained in India. But I recall seeing very few historic or current photographs of family life from India, and at this time, long before the era of instantaneous electronic communication and intensified image circulation, my relation to these sites and events of familial history was uncanny.

In 1971, the Bangladeshi struggle for independence from Pakistan precipitated war between India and Pakistan. During the war, our family, along with everyone else, coated our family car with a mysterious substance called "Multani mitti" (clay from the city of Multan) in a rather inept attempt at camouflage. The top semicircle of the car's headlights was painted black, presumably so that its beam would not shine upwards and attract the attention of an Indian bomber looking for targets. We slept under the concrete staircase in our home, whose entrance we fortified by filling gunny sacks with dirt and piling them high to create a protective wall in order to prevent shrapnel from entering. It turned out that this precaution was not so bizarre; many bombs were dropped on Karachi. One fell on my school during early morning, destroying the auditorium and killing one of the janitors. A couple were dropped in our own residential neighbourhood, just a few hundred metres from our house, creating a terrifying sound and shattering many windowpanes of our home. The next morning, we joined a crowd of residents as they stared in stupor at two destroyed homes whose domestic furniture and decorative curtains could be glimpsed through the collapsed walls and concrete rubble, evoking a very disturbing scenario. But during this war that was not distant to us at all, the

Pakistani state television and radio were working overtime, flooding the airwaves every day with patriotic songs and reports of destroyed Indian warplanes. This number was so enormous that its total in just a few days probably exceeded the entire size of the Indian air force by orders of magnitude. (I was reminded of this blatant propaganda in 2003 when Saddam Hussein's Minister of Information, Mohammed Saeed al-Sahhaf, made similar extravagant claims during the US invasion of Iraq.) The defeated Pakistani government refused to recognize Bangladesh until 1974—during these years of nonrecognition, imported books and atlases would have the name "Bangladesh" crossed out in black ink by apparatchiks working for government censors.

Over the years, as I have sought to make sense of these experiences, I have come to realize the degree to which aspects of this experience resonate with others from post-war nation-states. The decolonization process, which created new nation-states along Westphalian lines, also ended up shaping the lives and imaginations of their citizens and their subjects. In doing so, other affiliations that communities and societies had developed from pre-modern eras were effectively denied. But my distrust of the closures of the nation-state was also shared in many ways by Americans I met after I arrived in the US to attend university.

Elizabeth grew up on the West Coast and studied in San Francisco during the 1980s, in an environment that had already been deeply transformed by political and social activism from the late 1960s onwards, and was characterized by profound skepticism regarding the imperialist role of the US during the late Cold War. Moreover, her paternal family had migrated from County Sligo, Ireland to the US shortly after the Great Famine of the mid-nineteenth century. The family consequently closely followed news of "The Troubles"—the ethno-nationalist conflict in Northern Ireland during the 1970s and 1980s—and supported the idea of a united Ireland and an end to British dominance. Elizabeth studied art at the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI), which at that time had a very supportive and open environment for critical thinking and for conceptual, new media, and performance art—its graduates included artists like Paul McCarthy, whose critique of American society greatly influenced Elizabeth. Her professors at SFAI included the noted African-American painter Robert Colescott, who reworked motifs



from historical paintings towards a parodic critique of race; the multicultural activist and Filipino American artist Carlos Villa; and the experimental underground filmmaker George Kuchar. Her classmates also came from diverse international backgrounds, and many addressed social and political dilemmas in their work. These classmates included a student from Chile whose work dealt with the effects of the coup against Salvador Allende; a Greek classmate who examined the legacy of dictatorship in Greece; and a Vietnamese American whose work grappled with the political and social divisions in Vietnam during and after the Vietnam War.

Both of us had thus arrived at a juncture where we understood that the art of the present needs to address these quandaries of the self in a divided world, and where the claimed certainties of national belonging needed to be interrogated through artistic practice. Elizabeth and I have been collaborating on artistic practice for two decades, and our work can be placed at the intersection of conceptual art, pop art, and popular culture. The latter term denotes not only the art of mass culture in post-industrial societies, but also the rich materiality of urban street life in cities of the global South, and especially in South Asia, where one encounters bright plastic artifacts from various sources in dense juxtaposition, and where lights, decoration, and signage play a vital role in orienting one's consciousness and in establishing a relation to the specificity of place.

The *Efflorescence* series visualizes the strange symbolic emblems of official imagination through a popular visual register of materiality. As Benedict Anderson recognizes in *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 1983, imagination plays a central role in how nationalism incorporates individuals in its projects, and the official emblems that countries celebrate are therefore not incidental to their claim upon us. Nation-

states ascribe various forms of pageantry exclusive to themselves in order to express their singularity. Among other emblems, flowers have become specific national symbols, even though they grow over a wide geographic range. As markers of national identity they are especially arbitrary, and can truly be characterized as "contested botanicals". The *Efflorescence* series is inspired by the strangeness of this attribution. The word denotes the blooming of a flower and the flowering of a culture or a civilisation. Other connotations include the positive sense of glowing and being lit, but the word also bears negative valences, such as the manifestation of a stain or discolouration. This doubled sense of the word provides an evocative title for this series, which focuses specifically on the national flowers of contested regions. Inspired by popular commercial signage and created as large neon and incandescent works in metal, the works jump scale in their materiality and dimensions. Their graphical form and their industrial artifice acknowledge the manner in which such delicate natural forms are institutionally deployed as fixed emblems to vindicate intangible claims of identity.

The *Efflorescence* series constitutes a chapter in our continued investigation into how our consciousness is shaped in the era of mediatized biopower. Our media-saturated environment creates paradoxical effects: it legitimates official closures through the selection and repetition of powerful narrative forms and affective sensory registers. But simultaneously, popular, counterpublic, and vernacular material and media cultures also persist and become amplified. Together, these often competing narratives can create immersive and distracting experiences in ways that prevent a critical understanding of the world-picture. In our view, the work of contemporary art ought to interrogate both the blindness of official narratives, and the spectacular immersions of popular cultures, by bringing conceptual rigour to a dialogue with the sense and affect of the popular. We strive to accomplish this aim in our art practice through various modalities.