

iftikhar Dadi and elizabeth Dadi



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Gandhi, Che, Geronimo, Genghis Khan*, from 'They Made History Series', Digital images in circular backlit frames, 46 cm diameter, 2002.



Jan Rambo from 'They Made History Series', Digital Image in circular backlit frame 46 cm diameter, surrounded by 15 bulbs, Overall 76 cm diameter, 2002.

Hollywood's rampant rewriting of history and the influence that such cinematic readings have on the public's consciousness of great political figures and events, is reflected in *They Made History*, a series of circular lightboxes, each displaying a computer-manipulated portrait of a historically significant non-Western character. The faces of Che, Geronimo, Zapata, Gandhi, Malcolm X, Genghis Khan, The Empress of China, the Mahdi of Sudan and The King of Siam - set against appropriately transcendent backgrounds of sunsets, cascading waterfalls, snow capped mountains and infinite space - illuminate the world with rays of visionary light. Closer inspection, however, reveals a charade: it is the image of Ben Kingsley as Gandhi, Chuck Connors as Geronimo and John Wayne as Genghis Khan. Suggesting that "it is impossible to think of great personalities without being haunted by filmic narratives - the events of history are recuperated most effectively in the imaginary of the electronic media," the series contests the way the media frames and trivializes the past, by themselves appropriating these popular Western representations, as a way of recuperating suppressed histories and suggesting alternative readings. The figure of Jan Rambo, a Lollywood actor starring in the film *Hero*, further evokes this fraying circuit of global cinematic flows.

Iftikhar Dadi and Elizabeth Dadi have practiced as independent artists in their own right but have worked in collaboration during the last fifteen years. Their works comment upon the far-reaching effects of global media and advertising in advancing contemporary cultural imperialism, in the construction of identities and historical narratives, and in the preservation of colonial legacies. Their work also investigates the urban subaltern realm, the “informal” sector of the global southern megacity.

Global media has made enormous inroads into popular imagination everywhere to the degree it is hard to study the local without assessing its mediatic transformation. The sense of the local persists in a weakened form, due to specificities of local practices, but everywhere this is shot through with vectors of global commodities and media, leading to productive dislocations, specters, and dualities, a rich space for artists to explore and intervene in. Drawing on universally recognizable visual languages, Iftikhar Dadi and Elizabeth Dadi create vivid, iconic images that play upon our difficulty in separating fact from fiction to show how this clouds our contemporary understandings of the past and our present conceptions of other cultures.

Dividing their time between Ithaca, New York (where Iftikhar Dadi is associate professor in History of Art at Cornell University), and Karachi, Pakistan, the artists draw on global media and advertising, and the visual culture of South Asia to create works that comment on the construction of national, ethnic and religious identities, the manipulation of historical narratives, the ever-present legacies of colonialism, and contemporary cultural imperialisms. Global electronic media in particular, with its capacity to commodify every aspect of culture, provides them with potent reference points and a universally recognizable visual language. In an increasingly fragile and intolerant world, we are, according to the Dadis, caught up in a “carnavalesque power play in which both state power and mass response are theatrically enacted in cannibalistic consumption.” Their response is to create work that is playful and irreverent on the surface, but evocative of serious dilemmas confronting us today.

A Magic Carpet, glowing with the colored light of hundreds of bulbs, hovers over New York City. Installed at the Queens Museum of Art over its Panorama room, which contains a large and complete 3D architectural model of the five boroughs, the work is a response to the specificity of the Queens Museum of Art site, and provides a poetic, multiva-

lent commentary on the dilemmas of immigration by “Orientals” to New York City. On the one hand, the magic carpet enacts the longing for ease of travel over geographic and national boundaries that have become increasingly fraught for immigrants to negotiate since 9/11. On the other, the carpet evokes the silent flight from surveillance and the quiet deportations that have characterized the experience of thousands of immigrants during the last few years. Associated with Orientalist fantasy popular in the US mass media, the magic carpet is imagined here through industrial signage materials. In its stillness and tranquility, the panoramic view afforded by riding it, and its promise of open journey, it provides an apt metaphor of immigrant life.

Magic Carpet, Mixed media, with approx. 500 bulbs, 96 x 178 x 10 cm, 2005.



The artists are also deeply engaged in investigating the possibilities of informality in the megacity of the South. Broadly speaking, the conception of the “informal” characterizes key aspects of emergent realities of much of the developing world in terms of labor and economy, but its representation and artistic enactment is a central issue that needs more work by artists and theorists. The megacity of the global south today is one whose majority of the population lives and works in this so-called “informal sector,” a realm beyond formal, legal, and nation-state based regulation and representation, characterized by giant settlements, breakdowns in planning, ethnic violence, massive growth of private institutions, and also a very active contestation and creativity via texts, icons, spatiality,

and performativity deploying all sorts of media. Living in Karachi, the artists have been struck by the gap between the domain of artistic practice and the persistent gap between the realities of a mega and accounts of it via theoretical and artistic means. As a city, Karachi has experienced an unimaginable expansion from about half-million to well over fifteen million inhabitants in a period of only six decades. Normally debates on the informal are the preserve of economists, and development specialists, but have great salience also for the artists.

Today witnesses the continuous capitalist expansion for coveted space and resources leading to persistent struggles that characterize much of politics on the ground in the global South today, and in which the state is all too often on the side of elite

interests, with ensuing dispossession and marginalization. While informalization clearly gathers pace during the last three decades, its deeper historical background encompasses the colonial era, which embedded South Asia since the later nineteenth century into a global circuit of movements of raw materials, finished goods and peoples—the subalternity of South Asian artisans and their products for the past century and a half needs to be understood in this context. The transformation and rise of new trade and business ventures and new labor relations under unevenly fashioned and applied legal frameworks, control and mobility of bodies and imaginations, and new fashionings of identities since the nineteenth century are some of the genealogies that shape informalization today. How should artists imagine the political with reference to migrations, overseas work and complex diaspora linkages of movement of bodies, finances, and new imaginations engendered by media?



The *Aasaar (traces)* series comprise of hermetic traces of the living and the recent past of Karachi. Offered as quasi-scientific specimens, they present pieces of vernacular architectural facades, bits of disappeared painted signage, and ambiguous lettering. *Aasaar* are enigmatic clues scattered throughout the city's past and present, invoking the opaque density of everyday existence.



From Urdu Film series
C-print Diasec, 64 x 52 cm, 1990-2009.

A series of photographs of Urdu-language films shown on television, examining television as a way of imagining and shaping collective ideas of "success" or "urban modernity" as exemplified by the interiors, fashion, personae and gestures of the films. Taken at slow shutter speeds, they capture scanning lines of the television screen and produce a grainy, blurred effect several steps removed from the "reality" of the depicted scenes.

AbdouMaliq Simone's work on Africa suggests that, "Informality is productive and destructive; virtuous and toxic." In his Deleuzian inflected assessment, "Cities are the sites not of pre-existent defined sectors, specializations, and zones, but of variegated intensities that work out different spatial and organizational dispositions." While political negotiations serve to constrain and fix, one must also attend to the production of spectral imaginations and intensities, of new cultural forms often enabled by the productive role of global media and electronic piracy. The distinction between the legal and the licit offered by Itty Abraham is a very useful categorization. Activities that are illegal may be permissible and licit in the view of its participants. The space of the underworld/

borderland resists legislative logics of the nation state, and brings to crisis notions of national sovereignty, but also allows new possibilities for enactments of the self and community by material and artistic means. Art today is beginning to play a key role in addressing some of these dilemmas.

For the artists, newer media (meaning both technologically new, and those overlooked earlier) are arguably more capable of expressing these local and global concerns today. New mediatic, popular and urbanized visualities are not in themselves critical, yet the artists understand that in investigating the "popular," criticality remains one of the important tasks and responsibilities facing them and others.



Power of Love, inspired by popular street graphics and TV game shows, takes a playful look at ideas of desire and mass identity within the seductive power of global media, which is fundamentally transforming many aspects of life, and where religion, culture, and knowledge become instantly available for mass consumption.

