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Iftikhar Dadi & Elizabeth Dadi, early 1990s



"Urdu Film" series, Mid 1990s/2009

In Conversation with Iftikhar Dadi

by Aziz Sohail

Artist and scholar Iftikhar Dadi, who is associate professor in Cornell University's Department of History of Art and former Chair of its Department of Art, discusses his foray into art, the "everyday dynamism" of Karachi and its influence on his artistic practice, and the need for a more reflective approach to modernism in South Asia.

Aziz Sohail: Let's trace your path to where you are currently. You grew up in Karachi?

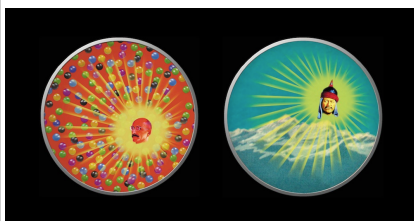
Iftikhar Dadi: Yes. My mother Dr. Shamim Dadi grew up in Lucknow and Bareilly. After Partition, my mother moved to Karachi, studied at Dow Medical College, worked as a physician at Lady Dufferin Hospital, and then ran her own practice that catered to low-income communities near the Kalapul area. She was also very committed to Hindustani classical vocal music and had an *ustad* with whom she practiced for many years. My father, Abdul Rahim Dadi, was of Gujarati background and grew up in Godhra and Bombay. He left Bombay before Partition to study in the US, and returned to Karachi with an MBA to become the IBM general manager in Pakistan for about thirty years. After completing high school in Karachi, I left to study for the US in 1979, soon after the Z.A. Bhutto era had ended and the Zia years were beginning.

AZ: How did your interest in art begin?

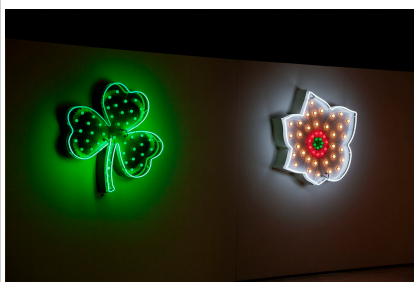
ID: My maternal uncle Dr. Abdul Sajid Khan was a very fascinating person. After returning from medical study in England during the 50s, he established his practice as a skin specialist in Saddar. But in his clinic, his examination table was a display of sharp fossils and archaeological fragments. He was friends with Sadequain, Ahmed Pervez,



"Power of Love" 24th Bienal de Sao Paulo, Brazil, 1998



"They Made History" (Gandhi, Genghis Khan), Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 2000



"Efflorescence" series, Art Gallery of Windsor, Canada, 2013

and many other artists, and was also close to many Urdu poets. He painted, wrote poetry, was a gifted photographer, and was deeply interested in geology and archaeology. For example, during weekends, we would visit historical sites such as Makli and Sonda near Karachi. He really broadened my cultural horizons.

As an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, I majored in engineering, and also studied Arabic. I then studied at the University of Washington in Seattle, where I received an MS in Electrical Engineering, and an MA in Near Eastern Languages and Literatures (Arabic and Persian).

AZ: At some point you returned to Karachi?

During my time in Seattle, I met Elizabeth, who had studied at the San Francisco Art Institute from where she received her BFA. She also studied art history at UC Berkeley. By this time, I was deeply involved in photography, working intensively in medium format. We decided to move to Karachi to research popular culture in the global south, as popular practices had informed our art already. I moved to Karachi in 1990 and Elizabeth followed shortly after in 1991.

Elizabeth had been very inspired by the faculty and alumni at the San Francisco Art Institute, such as Stan Brakhage, Larry Sultan, experimental filmmaker George Kuchar, Jay DeFeo, and Paul McCarthy. She had studied with African-American painter Robert Colescott, among the first critical appropriationists, who parodied racial stereotypes in art history paintings. She was also looking closely at Minimalism, Funk art, and Conceptual art, and especially the work of West Coast artists including John Baldessari, Mary Miss, Chris Burden, Nancy Rubins, and Jess.

Both of us shared an interest in Surrealism, Dada, and Art Povera, in the lightworks of James Turrell and Dan Flavin, and the films of Satyajit Ray, Visconti, Fassbinder, Claire Denis, and Chris Marker. I was closely studying art and architecture – Andy Warhol's *Death and Disaster* series, the photography of Bernd & Hilla Becher, as well as brutalist, "Punjabi Baroque," Bollywood & Lollywood architecture and set designs. I was also deeply involved in reading new methodological developments including Subaltern Studies, critical theory, the new anthropology of modernity in *Public Culture*, and the critical stance on modern art articulated in *Third Text*.

AZ: You basically skipped the Zia era, and came back when Karachi was in MQM territory. How was this return?

ID: I did visit Karachi regularly throughout the 80s during summers. And from the late 80s, I began photographing Karachi extensively, in black and white and in color. When we started working as artists in Karachi from the early 90s onwards, we were in some ways considered as outsiders. I was doing photography and Elizabeth was a conceptual artist trained in the US, our practices did not conform to the mainstream Karachi art orbit that was basically late modernist.

Ali Imam ran his Indus Gallery, which was a very important meeting place. Imam *sahib* was a brilliant conversationalist, it was where we met many artists, including Francis Newton Souza and Zarina Hashmi. Ardy Cowasjee ran his Ziggurat gallery for a few years and showed younger, more experimental work. It was a great art space, in a building right across from the Haroon House. I held a photo exhibition at VM Art Gallery. There were a few other artists of our generation around -- Naiza Khan, Samina Mansuri, David Alesworth, and Durriya Kazi. Vazira Zamindar (now a US-based historian) was working in Pakistan, and architectural historian William Glover, who was researching Lahore, would visit. Anthropology graduate students from the US of Karachi origin, Kamran Ali and Saba Mahmood, would visit as well. But it was a very small contemporary art scene in Karachi, with not enough critical debate within or across disciplines.

AZ: And Karachi was affecting you?

ID: Yes, when we moved to the megacity of Karachi, it possessed a tremendous visual charge. Karachi's surroundings have an uneasy relationship to the city, unlike Lahore, perhaps. And Karachi does not possess a deep history, its basically a mid-19th century city that saw the biggest transfer of population in South Asia in terms of percentage. No one claims ownership in terms of ancestry or authenticity. It has many diverse communities, an amnesiac history and memory, and voracious commercial energy. So the focus remains strictly urban, and on the recent past and present. This intrigued us, as the everyday dynamism of Karachi was at variance with stodgy debates on the "true" culture of Pakistan as based either on rural and folk expressions or on classical forms.

Elizabeth taught at the Indus Valley School (IVS) in the early to mid 90s. Naiza, David, and Samina also taught

there. I took thousands of photographs of Karachi's streets, architecture, and signage. And we deeply investigated Karachi's visual space and its productive energies. Our work, along with that of other artists, would later be called "Karachi Pop," but practices and concerns of the individuals were quite diverse. We collaborated with David and Durriya on an experiment—Heart Mahal—on which "urban artisans" were also collaborators.

Graduates from IVS at that time included Huma Mulji, Alia Hasan Khan, and Asma Mundrawala. Bani Abidi had recently graduated from NCA and had moved to Karachi, and for a time many of them shared studio spaces.

AZ: So you were all very inspired?

ID: Yes, it was an exciting time. Elizabeth was making conceptual serial works in cast brass and aluminum based on popular items such as plastic toys and household objects, informed by gender issues, minimalism-conceptualism. These works problematized the autonomy of the sculptural object, as they were rendered in metal sourced from recycled scrap, thematically referencing plastic popular objects. They were attempting a critical dialog with subaltern everyday lifeworlds. I was photographing Urdu films being broadcast on TV from 1990, and made a number of photographs framed in cast aluminum frames that referenced the mediation of space in Urdu cinema. I was also making experimental darkroom black and white photographic manipulations of Karachi imagery.

Both of our works were situated between the necessity for a critical and autonomous artistic practice, and the need to engage with popular visuality. We were deeply interested in urban vernacular technologies — not traditional craft — but a kind of "plastic popular." This is not pop art understood in its usual sense as arising from full commodification in an advanced capitalist society. But it does have a sense of everydayness and affirms aesthetics that are frowned upon by adherents of high culture. The claim is that everyday experience does provide adequate ground for artistic exploration. You draw upon your recent past and what you experience around you, from an urban experience full of plastic, stainless steel, lights, vernacular architectures, and print and electronic media. And from tensions of tremendous contestation in Karachi streets, disjunctive claims based on commercial competition, and political, religious, and ethnic divisions. The art scene was so much smaller then, and our projects were quite new to Pakistan, so the work was all more or less experimental. An important and open question was, how does art address this conflicted and dense experience of the city. We wanted to find some way, literally with the idea of "chalo kaam karo," by ongoing and mobile practice and by trying out various tactics and strategies.

This was my experience of practicing as an artist in the Karachi of the 1990s. And Elizabeth and myself have been collaborating on our art practice since, for over fifteen years now.

I was also involved in establishing linkages with Indian contemporary artists and curators. We had met Nalini Malani in Copenhagen in 1996, and decided to do an exhibition that would critically reflect on the Partition on its 50th anniversary in 1997. Curated by Pooja Sood, *Mappings* exhibition included myself, Nalini, Risham Syed and others — it traveled to New Delhi, Bombay and Lahore during 1997-98. And I attended the first Khoj Workshop in 1998, creating further linkages with Indian artists.

AZ: So when did you move to the USA and why?

ID: We moved in 1998 because I was intrigued by my Karachi experience and wanted to understand it and its vexed relation to modernism, as a research question. Although one had this stimulating city to investigate, I had increasingly felt that I needed a larger dialog with others from academia, and from other postcolonial experiences to better make sense of it.

I applied to various PhD programs and decided upon Cornell, which was one of the few programs at that time that was open to the study of nonwestern modern art. We had also been working with Thai curator Apinan Poshyananda, who had done his PhD in Cornell, and was doing groundbreaking work on Asian contemporary art. He curated our work at the 24th Sao Paulo Biennale in 1998. In addition, I was interested in the work of Cornell faculty, including theorist Susan Buck-Morss who engages with the Frankfurt School, and art historian Salah Hassan who works on modern African art. Salah was my PhD advisor and we have also collaborated on a number of projects such as *Unpacking Europe*. Salah is also founder-director of Cornell's Institute for Comparative Modernities, of which I am a board member.

Since 2004, I have been a full-time faculty member at Cornell in the Department of History of Art, having received tenure in 2010. In addition, I served as chair of the Department of Art during 2010-2014.

AZ: Why this particular focus in your first book on Modernism in Muslim South Asia?

ID: I wanted to focus on modernism, as I had seen works of many of these artists at my uncle's house and at Indus Gallery. I was also very engaged with the larger methodological and postcolonial question of how to characterize the development of modern art in the non-west. I felt that much of what had been written previously was anthropological. Instead, I wanted to focus on modernism as a deeply intellectual, discursive, and reflexive practice. In the book, I have analyzed in some depth, the ideas, practice, and reception of a few key artists, situating them as case studies that illuminate larger concerns. In my online interview with ROROTOKO, I explain the stakes of my book in greater detail.

AZ: You have been at Cornell, and you also became the Chair of Fine Arts. How is your practice engaged with your academic work?

ID: During my time as chair of the Department of Art at Cornell, I focused on making the program more global in numerous ways — curriculum, speakers, exchanges etc. And in the Department of History of Art, I continue to teach a variety of courses on modern and contemporary art in comparative and global contexts, and supervise diverse and stimulating doctoral research projects.

I see myself both as a scholar, and as an artist working in collaboration with Elizabeth. Since our art practice is research-based, theoretical and academic perspectives continually enrich it. I do not see myself as a full-time curator, but the selected curatorial projects that I have worked on have also been research-based. For example, the expanded *Lines of Control* exhibition at Cornell's Herbert F Johnson Museum of Art in 2012 that Hammad Nasar invited me to collaborate on, was a platform with a serious publication, symposium, film screenings, and engagement with numerous Cornell faculty. And the Shemza exhibition that I curated at Hammad and Anita Dawood's Green Cardamom space in London in 2009 was also based on extensive primary research, and has hopefully contributed to renewed interest in the artist and in South Asian modernism more broadly.

AZ: What are your researching now, what are your upcoming projects?

ID: I am currently engaged in academic writing on art, cinema, and urbanism. In our own art practice, Elizabeth and myself continue to work on a number of extended projects that address key tensions of globalization, such as closures of identity among individuals and nations, and the aesthetic and productive capacities of informal economies. These projects are being realized in a variety of media, such as sculpture, digital images, and texts.

All images courtesy of Iftikhar Dadi.

Aziz Sohail is Studio Director for Rashid Rana Studio and an independent curator and critic based between Karachi and Lahore.