

## Being objective

By Reema Gehi

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*Ordinary objects from the early 90s, sourced from four cities, are part of US-based artists Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi's recent art show.*

US-based artists, Iftikhar Dadi and Elizabeth Dadi have collaborated in their art practice for over two decades. In their own words, their work investigates “memory, borders, and identity in contemporary globalisation, the productive capacities of urban informalities in the global South, and the mass culture of post-industrial societies.” These investigations have translated into landmark exhibitions — their recent one being Tilism, which is currently on view at Jhaveri Contemporary. Iftikhar, an associate professor at Cornell University, shares his views.

### ◆ What inspires the two of you to create art?

Our work can be broadly placed at the intersection of conceptual art, pop art, and popular culture. The latter refers not only to the mass culture of post-industrial societies, but also the rich materiality of urban street life in cities of the global South, where one encounters popular culture across various media in dense juxtaposition. This plays a vital role in establishing a relation to the specificity of place. We are equally in conversation with American and Asian popular culture as well as with minimalism, conceptual art, new and old sensorial technologies. In our ongoing art practice, we continue to work on many projects that address key tensions of our time. These include the dilemmas of identity among individuals and nations; and the aesthetic and productive capacities of informal economies. Our projects are being realised in a variety of media, such as sculpture, digital images and texts.

### ◆ Could you explain the technique used for your current show?

For Tilism, each object is about an inch-or-so in size. To reveal all their details, each of them were photographed about 20 times, each time the focus advancing slightly. The multiple photos were combined digitally so that the final image shows the object in full focus with microscopic detail, a technique called focus stacking. The images were then placed on a background, with a caption that anchors the object. This is our homage to the history of South Asian advertising and graphic design from the of 60s and 70s. The background colour fields also reference midcentury artists and theorists who were foundational in working out modern colour theory — especially Joseph Albers.

## ◆ How do you make everyday objects relevant to your viewers?

We began collecting these objects from the early 1990s. They are sourced from four cities, Karachi, Lahore, Delhi, and Bombay. We found them to be very intriguing for many reasons. These are inexpensive toys sold on *thelas* by the roadside or by hawkers, in temporary bazaars or in low income neighbourhoods. They are made with plastic waste that has been recycled. These are all locally made, in small informal workshops. So, there is a socioeconomic dimension to their making and circulation. And although they are made locally, the shapes of some of them may have appropriated from previous objects, including those made abroad. Over time, you would sometimes find the same object being repeated with minor changes. This is because the realm of informal production trespasses over the borders of copyright and branding. All this points to realms of life, work, and play that remain largely invisible to many of us.

We wanted to attend to their anonymity by reframing them in a graphical context familiar to advertising. We were inspired by South Asian and Iranian graphic design from the 60s, when there were many modernist typographical layouts. Here, the playful typography visually anchors the object above, and offers a kind of “branding.” There is, perhaps, a shared visual language in urban South Asia of objects such as the tiffin, the fan, and the stereo. And because of the objects’ irregular shapes and distinctive colour palette, there is something of the experience of informal life in these cities that comes across as well.

**Tilism is on view at the Jhaveri Contemporary till Jan 5, Colaba; 11am–7pm. Call: 22021051**

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