

Of heroes, nations and identities

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Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi's collaborative art practice uses popular culture iconography to convey how people imaginatively conceive their own history

A portrait of Gandhi looks straight into your eyes as you step in. This is not the familiar image displayed in government offices and found on currency notes. It is from Richard Attenborough's 1982 film *Gandhi*, starring Ben Kingsley. This is a computer-manipulated portrait in a circular lightbox, surrounded by a dramatic halo that draws inspiration from the late Gothic era painter, Giotto, as well as later Mughal paintings. The Gandhi portrait is one of the most arresting images from the art show 'Epic Ecologies', which showcases representative work from three different installation series by US-based artists Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi.

Titled 'Gandhi', this particular work is part of a series titled 'They Made History' that also features Flora Robson playing Empress Dowager Cixi from China's Qing dynasty in the 1963 film *55 Days at Peking*, and John Wayne playing Genghis Khan in the 1957 film *The Conqueror*. The series itself consists of ten works, only three of which are on display at this particular showing.

The artists are concerned with Hollywood's packaging of non-Western historical narratives for mass consumption. In their exploration of nation states, identities, borders and cultural imperialism, the Dadis draw on visual references from popular culture. They want to demonstrate how cinematic interpretations often influence the way citizens remember their past and their heroes. There's also a questioning of the idea that the actions of a few individuals alter the course of history.

Iftikhar Dadi grew up in Karachi through the 1960s and 1970s, with parents who had migrated to Pakistan after Partition.

He has lived through the war between West and East Pakistan, leading to the formation of Bangladesh with India's tacit support. Elizabeth Dadi belongs to a family that migrated from Ireland to the United States of America shortly after the Great Famine of the mid-19th century, and subsequently grew to support the idea of a united Ireland and an end to British dominance.

"Gandhi is especially interesting for us, due to our particular engagement with history and because Gandhi played such a powerful and largely positive role in the 20th century. The background in our Gandhi work is actually drawn from popular posters of Sufi saints in their shrines. Somehow this seemed appropriate to imagine Gandhi with," says Iftikhar Dadi.

Trained at Cornell University (Iftikhar) and San Francisco Art Institute (Elizabeth) respectively, the art practice of the Dadis has been invested in making sense of wartime propaganda, decolonisation, and the so-called clash of civilizations.

Playfulness and parody

Though their approach is one of playfulness and parody, they never seem to lose sight of their politics.

In another series titled 'Efflorescence', they use flowers: dahlia (in Cocoxochitl), hibiscus (in Karkadé) and magnolia (in Mokran) to talk about politically contested regions such as Mexico, Sudan and North Korea respectively. These works, inspired by urban street culture and popular commercial signage, highlight how symbols are employed and celebrated as markers of national identity. They have been created as large neon and incandescent works in metal, shattering your image of flowers as fresh and delicate objects. Their exaggerated scale and artificiality makes you recall nationalisms that are rigidly defined, exclusive, and arbitrary. This series, which draws on Benedict Anderson's theoretical formulation of imagined communities, also includes flowers that represent Ireland, Palestine and India but they have been left out of the current exhibition.

The continuities between ‘They Made History’ and ‘Efflorescence’ are more than evident from the artists’ preoccupation with how the global media constructs reality. This is heightened in ‘Urdu Film Series’, a set of works that reference Lollywood, Pakistan’s film industry based in Lahore.

You are introduced to this colourful world of make-belief through these lines of poetry from Ghalib: *azadi-e nasim mubarak kih har taraf tute pare hain halqah-e dam-e hava-e gul* (celebrate the breeze’s freedom: everywhere lie broken meshes of the flowers net of desire).

Apart from lamenting the loss of freedom, this poetic interlude might also be a nostalgic nod to Iftikhar Dadi’s familial roots. His mother’s family, originally from Lucknow and Bareilly prior to the Partition, was deeply fond of Urdu literature. His father, who belongs to a Gujarati-speaking family originally from Godhra, grew up in Bombay.

The ‘Urdu Film Series’ includes, an installation of eight TV screens arranged in two neat rows. These are titled ‘Anticipation’, ‘Delirium’, ‘Energy’, ‘Compassion’, ‘Wonder’, ‘Lust’, ‘Astonishment’, and ‘Charisma’, these are reminiscent of moments from films such as *Guide*, *Bobby*, *Shatranj Ke Khiladi* and many more.

These conjure up an array of emotions that popular cinema is known for. These are not static images. They give the impression of bright colours dissolving into projections of fantasy that are fading away.

Though the visual language of Lollywood and Bollywood appears similar, the historical trajectory of both film industries seems to have been very different, at least in terms of commercial success and international visibility. “By the 40s, Bombay was of course, a major production centre, but Lahore was also producing films. After 1947, many people working in Bombay ended up in Lahore, such as singer Noor Jehan, the progressive director Zia Sarhady, and of course, Manto, who also wrote for Lahore cinema after relocating there.

There was actually a lot of ‘borrowing’ and sharing from Bombay films, but some genuinely good films were made.

Anarkali myth

Many melodramatic and historical themes are shared, such as the Anarkali myth, or the tension between dissolute westernisation and ‘Eastern’ values in ’60s and ’70s cinema,” said Iftikhar Dadi.

The ‘Urdu Film Series’ especially resonates at a time when younger filmmakers are trying to revive Pakistani cinema, which suffered a severe decline during the ’80s and ’90s: a phenomenon that Dadi attributes to restrictive government policies as well as the easy availability of Hindi films from India, owing to the arrival of the VCR.

In more recent times though, the centre of Pakistani film production is now in Karachi.

“Both Karachi and Mumbai are commercial and port cities, and have attracted people of various ethnicities who have carved a niche in both the places. In Karachi, you have had important Parsi shipping families, Bohra traders, banking families originally from Bombay etc. Both cities were part of the Bombay Presidency under the British.

They are both mega urban centres. As artists, we are also interested in Mumbai as a centre of industrial production. Our new work is looking increasingly at informal economies and aesthetics, and both Karachi and Mumbai are very inspiring places to think this through,” says Iftikhar Dadi.

‘Epic Ecologies’ is on at Jhaveri Contemporary till January 16, 2016.

(Chintan Girish Modi is a freelance writer who follows cross-border cultural exchanges with a passion.)

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