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Identities Repackaged

‘Epic Ecologies’, an exhibition by artists Elizabeth and Iftikhar Dadi, brings together three series of works to examine questions of identity.

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Enter Jhaveri Contemporary in Mumbai and you're greeted by the Empress of China, Mahatma Gandhi and Genghis Khan. These computer-manipulated portraits on circular lightboxes, are surrounded by halos, which one might find in the works of the Late Gothic painter Giotto and the immediate conclusion one draws is that these works are meant to be a comment on the near-

mythic status attained by certain historical figures. But these works are craftier than that, because a second look shows that these are not portraits of the actual historical personalities, but of the actors who played them. So the Empress of China is actually Flora Robson, who played her in the 1963 film, *55 Days in Peking*, while Gandhi is Ben Kingsley (*Gandhi*, 1982) and Genghis Khan is John Wayne (*The Conqueror*, 1956). What seemed like simple, hagiographical depictions at first glance, now resonates with questions about cultural appropriation and the consumption of history via popular culture.

These works are part of “They Made History”, one of the three series of works displayed in “Epic Ecologies”, the first solo exhibition in India by Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi. The husband and wife duo has been collaborating artistically for two decades and their work, as Iftikhar describes, is at the intersection of pop art and conceptual art. “These are often seen as antithetical movements, but we find inspiration from both. We are drawn to the salience and power of what is considered to be ‘popular’ and which includes media, urban forms, and vernacular visualities. But we are also inspired by the critical and questioning stance of conceptual practice,” says Iftikhar.

In “They Made History”, therefore, the attempt is to look at how we understand history in the age of media. It is a fraught question, adds Iftikhar, particularly since industries like Hollywood have taken it upon themselves to repackage the stories of actual historical figures in a more palatable way. There is also, perhaps, an element of colonial arrogance in the assumption that all an American with a midwestern accent needs to do to play a Mongolian warlord is slap on “yellow face makeup” and grow a “Fu Manchu-style moustache”. By placing a halo around the actor in his undeniably racist, appropriationist costume, the Dadis are subtly poking fun at this arrogance, while also critically examining how history, too, has become a consumable product.

The other two series in the exhibition — “Efflorescence” and “Urdu Film Series” — deal with similarly weighty questions by using popular tropes. The former comprises a series of illuminated installations, all depicting the national flowers of different countries — Cocoxochitl (Mexico’s Dahlia), Karkade (Sudan’s Hibiscus) and Mokran (North Korea’s Magnolia). Iftikhar says, “Among other emblems, flowers have also become specific national symbols, even though they grow over a wide geographic range, and can truly be characterised as ‘contested botanicals’.” Thus, the very idea of having a “national flower” (or animal or bird or tree) becomes suspect.

The “Urdu Film Series” is the most direct examination of the influence of pop culture. The works capture scenes from the Pakistani Urdu films from the ’60s and ’70s, which were played on Pakistani television in the ’90s, when Iftikhar — who is an associate professor in Cornell University’s Department of History of Art — was living in Karachi. He had returned to his hometown after studying abroad and along with Elizabeth, was profoundly influenced by the dynamism and visual charge of the city. One of the strongest influences was the Pakistan film industry or Lollywood, as it is sometimes called. Iftikhar says, “Thematically and cinematically, the Pakistani Urdu films were not that different from those made in Bombay. This has to do with continuities in personal and shared themes. Many melodramatic, historical, dramatic and lyrical themes are borrowed or shared. These films were screened on TV in the ’90s in Karachi, so they are already a kind of after-image, since they are no longer on the cinema screen.” The series,

created by using a medium format camera mounted on a tripod with extended exposure, attempts to capture the transfixing power of cinema, and the dreams of modernity, aspiration and desire that it peddles. With individual works titled as Lust, Astonishment, Compassion and Wonder among others, the series is a comment on how we often turn to cinema to look for cues about how we should be.

Bringing the three series together into a single exhibition is the overarching theme of identity in post-colonial societies, particularly in South Asia. The works — made using jarringly modern media such as plastic and light bulbs — juxtapose the inherited sense of identity of different communities with the constructed identities that they receive via concepts such as nationhood or through pop culture and media. For generations that identify with a single emblem or which understand their own complicated histories through imported narratives, these are important issues.

“Epic Ecologies” is on at Jhaveri Contemporary, Mumbai, till January 16.