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Plastic popular

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Nostalgia trip: Installation at Jhaveri Contemporary (below left to right): Mobile phones & tiffins

Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi's new show explores the intersection of art and popular culture through unbranded toys found in South Asian markets

Uneven edges, prickly to the touch is perhaps the one ever lasting, sensory memory of cheap plastic toys. Colourful, unbranded playthings, often sold on wooden carts on street corners or in crowded local markets, might now be a fading memory for those who grew up between the late 1970s-90s in India. But a new show, by artists Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi at Jhaveri Contemporary, brings alive these curios of the past. *Tilism*, defined as “an inanimate object transformed into its own world”, is a concise show of 12 large format images of mass-produced toys peculiar to the popular cultures of South Asia. More specifically that of India, Pakistan and perhaps Bangladesh.

The images, created through a long process of multiple exposures to ensure crystal clarity or “focus stacking” took about ten months to complete. Each toy, about an inch or so big, was lit from three angles with polarising filters to control the light reflecting off the surface. The result is evenly lit objects whose source material, unless told, you would remain unsure of. Marbled plastic used here resembles wax, with the crude design and textures further accentuating that effect. The enlargement of the true size of the toys augments confounding, rendering a much higher value to these otherwise inexpensive, insignificant items. The fact that these are now framed, singled out artworks in a legitimate gallery space suddenly makes you wonder why?

More than child's play

The reason behind this is what defines the collaborative two-decade old art practice of the Dadis. Iftikhar, originally from Karachi and now based in the US is an associate professor at Cornell University's Department of History of Art and former chair of its Department of Art. Elizabeth, an American, is a graduate of the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI). Together they explore issues of identity, belonging, borders and memory by focusing on the “urban vernacular technologies” or what one could call “plastic popular” in South Asia. This brings into its purview a large range of things mass produced for common consumption, including signage, posters, toys, architectural styles and iconic symbols.

“They are neither authentic craft objects, nor high-end design, nor branded toys. That is precisely why we find them meaningful, as they point towards realms of life, work, and play that remain largely invisible”, explains Iftikhar. Cassette players, tiffin boxes, table fans, homes, dressing tables and phones — a pair of each, makes up the clean, structured display at the gallery. Though one might be reminded instantly of Andy Warhol's soup cans and coke bottles owing to everyday products and the fluorescent colours, this is not quite that. “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,” clarifies Iftikhar, in an interview with *Art Now, Pakistan* (Feb 2015). The framing is more an ode to artist Joseph Albers' ‘Homage to the Square’ series, a landmark in modern colour theory.

In that sense the work is best placed at an “...intersection of conceptual art, pop art, and popular culture. The latter term denotes not only the art of mass culture in post-industrial societies, but also the rich materiality of urban street life in cities of the global South, and especially in South Asia...” (Iftikhar as quoted in the book *Border Cultures*). When translated from Urdu, the titles for the toys — ‘*makan*’ (home/house) or ‘*singhar mez*’ (dressing table) or even phone, are all symbolic of a certain class aspiration. Of comforts and conveniences that might not be as readily available to the lower socio-economic strata who are often its target audience. Ironically, though the affordability of the toys is what sells. The work also makes a larger comment on the market structures and its relation to the economy. In the cycle of industrialisation, consumerism and globalisation, traditional hand-made wooden toys which were replaced by these plastic toys are now replaced by equally if not more inexpensive Chinese toys.

Street collectibles

Sourced from Karachi, Lahore, Delhi, and Mumbai, the Dadis started collecting these toys in the early 1990s. “These specific ones are no longer to be found anywhere. Perhaps, we are the only ones who collected these?,” wonders Iftikhar. Perhaps that’s even true. Which makes one wonder what is worth collecting? Or does something need to be labelled valuable enough to then be collected as evidence of a certain period in history? Whose history does one consider relevant and who is the maker/recorder of this history? Does popular culture that remains local, invisible, still qualify as important enough to be academised? “There is an aspect to their proliferation that we find very interesting”, observes Iftikhar.

These toys made in local workshops, easily “trespasses over the borders of copyright and branding” and yet retain some allegiance to the original object that they were fashioned from. In spite of their inferior quality of production, often involving toxic matter like lead, they are an intrinsic part of the socio-economic fabric of the region and the culture that produces them.

Tilism is ongoing at Jhaveri Contemporary, Colaba until January 5, 2019