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“Epic Ecologies”: Pakistani-American artist duo Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi in Mumbai

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Jhaveri Contemporary in Mumbai presents artist duo Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi’s first solo show in India.

The Dadis, Pakistani and American in nationality, now based in the United States, have been collaborating for 20 years and engage with notions of identity, borders and memory through the lens of popular media and mass culture.



Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi, “Urdu Film Series”, ‘Lust’, 2009, Diasac, C-Print, 50.8 x 63.5 cm, edition of 5 + 1AP. Image courtesy the artists and Jhaveri Contemporary.

Mumbai’s **Jhaveri Contemporary** has recently launched the first solo show in India of artist duo Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi. The exhibition entitled “**Epic Ecologies**” will be on view until 9 January 2016. The New York-based artist duo Iftikhar (originally from Pakistan) and Elizabeth Dadi (originally from the United States) have collaborated for twenty years.

Iftikhar Dadi holds a PhD from Cornell University, where he is Associate Professor in the Department of History of Art and served as Chair from 2010 to 2014 in the Art department. He has curated a variety of exhibitions including among others “**Lines of Control: Partition as a Productive Space**”, Herbert F. Johnson Museum of Art, Cornell University (2012) and “**Anwar Jalal Shemza: Calligraphic Abstraction**”, Green Cardamom, London (2009). Iftikhar has also authored books including *Modernism and the Art of Muslim South Asia* (2010).



Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi, “Urdu Film Series”, ‘Delirium’, 2009, Diasac, C-Print, 50.8 x 63.5 cm, edition of 5 + 1AP. Image courtesy the artist and Jhaveri Contemporary.

Elizabeth Dadi holds a BFA from San Francisco Art Institute (1985), and she worked as an independent artist prior to collaborating with Iftikhar. Together, they have exhibited their large-scale installations at influential art events and important institutions, such as the 24th Bienal de São Paulo, the 3rd **Asia-Pacific Triennial, Liverpool Biennial**, Centre Pompidou in Paris, Moderna Museet in Stockholm, Queens Museum of Art in New York and **Whitechapel Gallery**, London.

The artists address local concerns and in doing so engage with broader themes of identity, borders and memory. To do this they often use the lens of popular media and mass culture, augmented with popular cultural practices, often working in collaboration with Pakistani craftsmen.



Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi, “Urdu Film Series”, ‘Astonishment’, 2009, Diassec, C-Print, 50.8 x 63.5 cm, edition of 5 + 1AP. Image courtesy the artists and Jhaveri Contemporary.

The third world metropolis is a constant point of reference within their oeuvre. By appropriating the cultural traditions prevalent in South Asian cities, the artists encourage us to find new meanings in the materiality of the lights, decorations and neon signs. These visuals are drawn from the backdrop around which society and culture are generated.

In an interview with *Art Now Contemporary Art of Pakistan*, Iftikhar speaks of one such city, Karachi, which was a **potent source of inspiration for the two artists**:

[...Karachi] possessed a tremendous visual charge. 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. I took thousands of photographs of Karachi’s streets, architecture, and signage. And we deeply investigated Karachi’s visual space and its productive energies.



Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi, “They Made History”, ‘Genghis Khan’, 1999 – 2010s, metal, plexiglass, LED, Duratrans, prints, circular light box , 42.75 cm diameter, edition of 5. Image courtesy the artists and Jhaveri Contemporary.

Iftikhar and Elizabeth visualise the “productive energy” of these cities, whilst proposing questions related to colonial history, national culture and multinationals. **About their work**, writer and visiting art lecturer at University of East London Diana Yeh wrote on *Culture Base*:

In an increasingly fragile and intolerant world, we are, according to the Dadis, caught up in a ‘carnavalesque power play in which both state power and mass response are theatrically enacted in cannibalistic consumption’. Their response is to create work that is playful and irreverent, and its content, like the mass media they critique, has the power to both seduce and appall at the same time.

In their current exhibition in Mumbai, three complementary projects join force. They share a common ideology,

and natural and cultural context, and all possess ambitious narratives.



Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi, "Urdu Film Series", 'Anticipation', 2009, Diasec, C-Print, 50.8 x 63.5 cm, edition of 5 + 1AP. Image courtesy the artist and Jhaveri Contemporary.

The "Urdu Film Series" blends together the narrative of cultural specificity inspired by the Pakistani film tradition. Borrowing from this tradition, fondly called *Lollywood*, and its departure from Bollywood and Hollywood, the work examines the multiplicity of encounters between form, medium and temporality. The works depict stills from the Urdu film industry of the 1960s and 1970s, and explore the subsequent materialisation of modern urbanity that was aided by the intervention of the mass media.

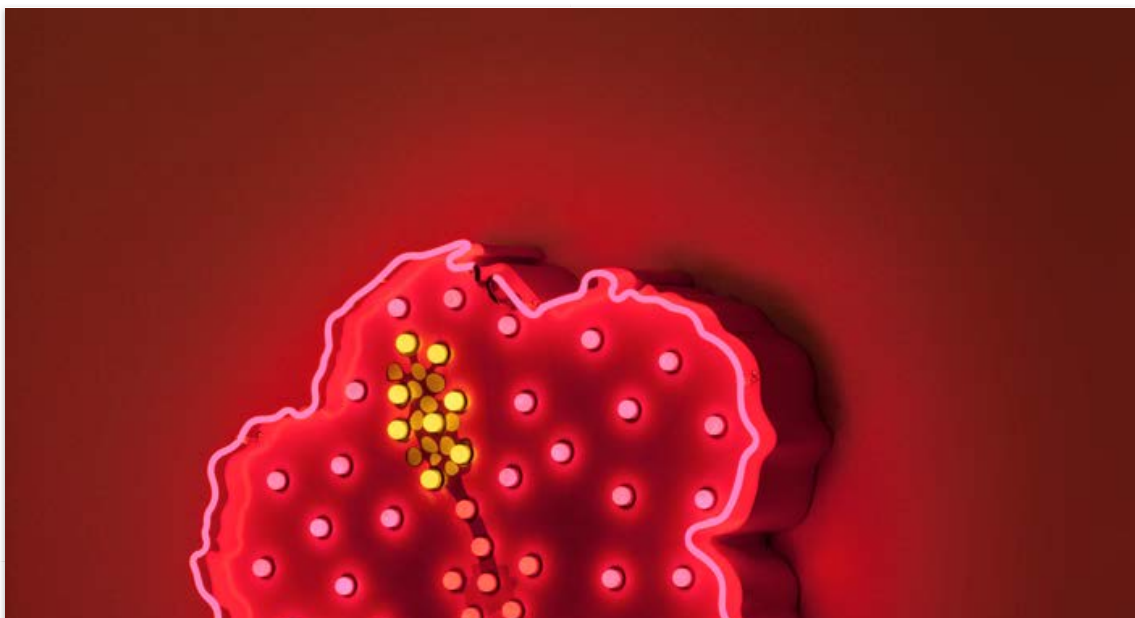
These films were shown on state-controlled television and channelled notions of modernity, which was informed by the visual aesthetics, as depicted through these films. The slow shutter speed of the camera captures the scanning lines and faded blurry hues and presents the films as shattered dreamscapes, reminiscent of a bygone era.





Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi, “They Made History”, ‘Empress of China’, 1999 – 2010s, metal, plexiglass, LED, Duratrans prints, circular light box , 42.75 cm diameter, edition of 5. Image courtesy the artists and Jhaveri Contemporary.

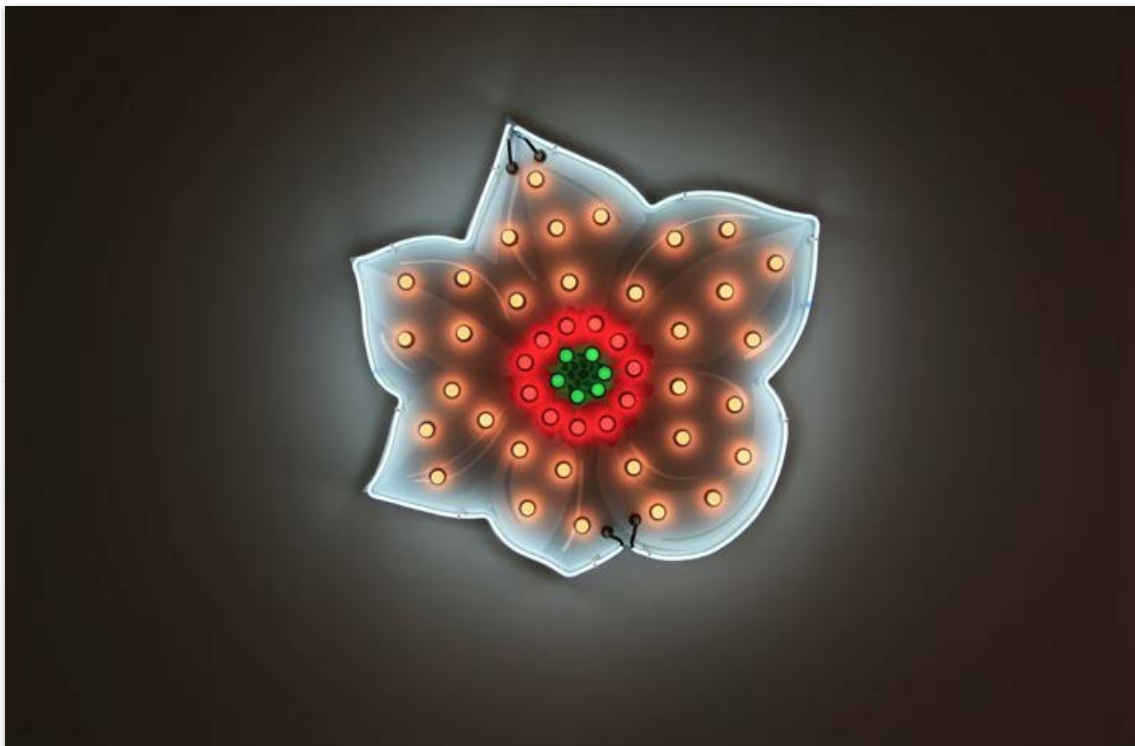
In “They Made History” (1999-2010s), Iftikhar and Elizabeth conceive a kaleidoscopic and cinematic rendering of political history, as imagined and re-imagined by popular media. The series consists of circular light boxes that depict computer-generated portraits of non-Western icons as played by Western actors, set against a phantasmagorical backdrop. In a society where public consciousness is dictated and shaped through popular media, these works provide a reading into the prospect of an alternative history. The work concerns itself with the impact that cinema’s version of history has on public reception of political figures.





Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi, “Efflorescence”, ‘Karkadé’, 2013, neon, bulbs, aluminium, mixed media, 122 x 122 x 30.5 cm, edition of 3 + 1AP. Image courtesy the artists and Jhaveri Contemporary.

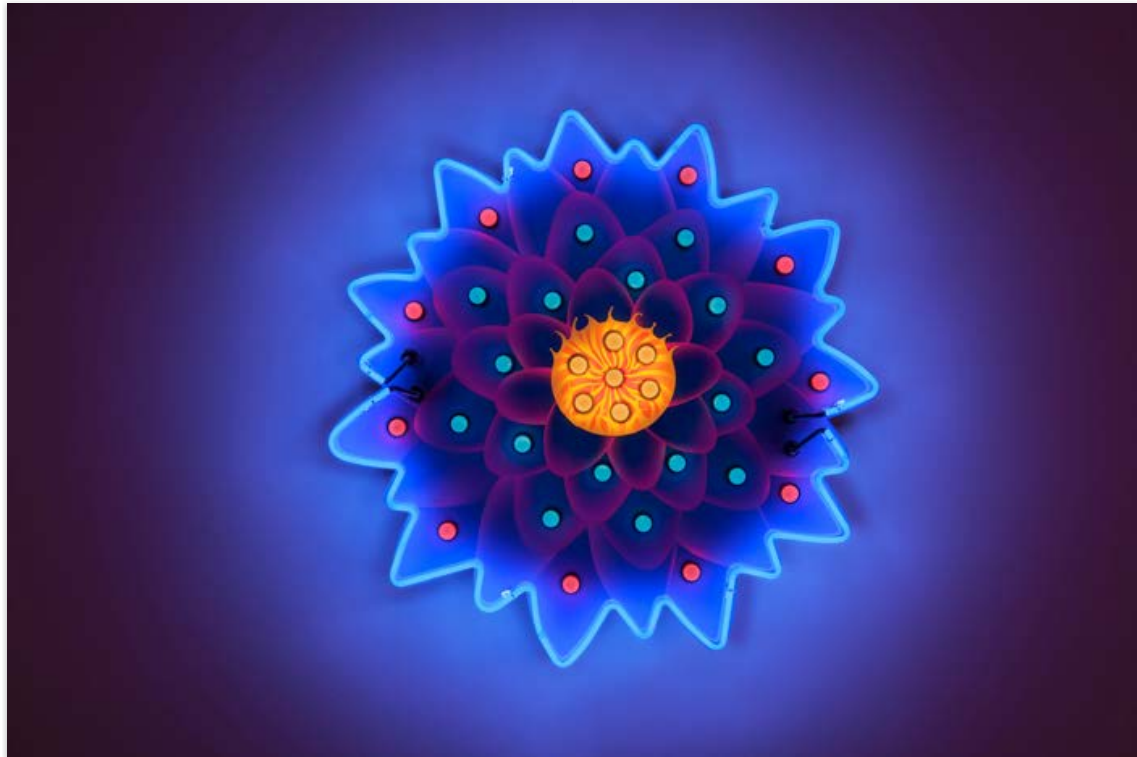
The idea of nation-state and their associated emblems is explored in the “Efflorescence” series, shown in April 2015 at Cornell University’s **John Hartell Gallery**. The concept of nation-state actualises a recognised form of sovereignty, which is aided through imagination and cognition. The singularity of the nation-state is often expressed through national symbols, flowers being one example.



Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi, “Efflorescence”, ‘Mokran’, 2013, neon, bulbs, aluminium, mixed media, 122 x 122 x 30.5 cm, edition of 3 + 1AP

The word ‘efflorescence’ contains a duality of connotations: in the positive sense, it refers to blooming – the flowering of culture and civilisation; and in the negative sense, it refers to a rash or eruption on the skin. The

double-charged word becomes the title of this work, which re-presents the national flowers of contested areas.



Iftikhar and Elizabeth Dadi, "Efflorescence", 'Cocoxochitl', 2013, neon, bulbs, aluminium, mixed media, 122 x 122 x 30.5 cm, edition of 3 + 1AP. Image courtesy the artists and Jhaveri Contemporary.

The pieces from this series employ the visual language of commercial signage, abundant in the streets of the South Asian metropolis. The works are conceived in neon and suggest an enhanced, almost exaggerated dimensional scale and industrial-feel. The simulated artificiality of these flowers, challenge the institutional and constitutional incorporation of these natural forms, to fulfill the political agenda of national identity.

Ambika Rajgopal

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