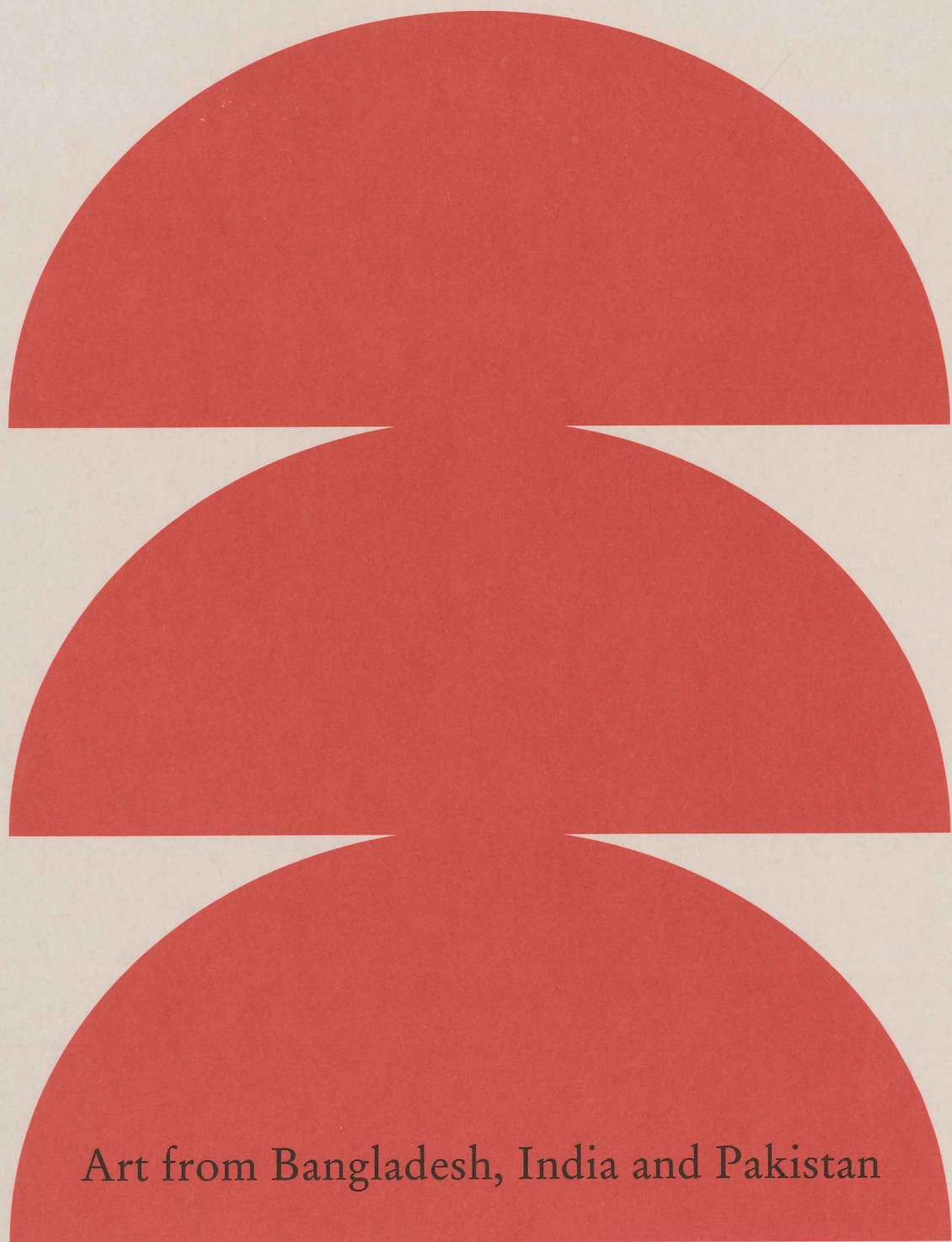


HOMELANDS



Art from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan

Iftikhar Dadi, b. 1961, Karachi and Elizabeth Dadi, b. 1957, Seattle. Both live and work in Ithaca. New works from their series *Efflorescence* (2013–onwards) feature in ‘Homelands’.

DS Iftikhar, you grew up in Karachi and went to study in the United States in 1979 where you later met Elizabeth, who had studied at the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI), later returning in the early 1990s as an artist couple to Karachi. How did you both come to art? And how has your collaboration evolved over the years?

ID& ED As artists from diverse backgrounds, our shared collaborative practice over two decades investigates the remainders across which norms of identification operate in various contemporary societies. We are deeply interested in everyday material and sensory processes that continually recreate a world that is more open and encompassing than the limits of statist, national, and identitarian affiliations.

ID I grew up in Karachi during the 1960s and 1970s in a family with parents who had both migrated from India after Partition in 1947. Recollections by

my family of their previous life in India often seemed intangible and distant to our experiences in Pakistan. My maternal uncle Dr. Abdul Sajid Khan was a very fascinating person. After returning from medical study in England during the 1950s, he established his practice in Saddar, Karachi. But in his clinic, his examination table was unusable, as it served to display sharp fossils and archaeological fragments. He was friends with the artists Sadequain, Ahmed Parvez, Ali Imam, and others, and was also close to many Urdu poets. He painted, wrote poetry, was a gifted photographer, and was deeply interested in geology and archaeology. Before my teenage years, in 1971 the Bangladeshi struggle for independence from Pakistan precipitated into war between India and Pakistan. The Pakistani government refused to formally acknowledge the loss of East Pakistan and did not recognise Bangladesh as an independent nation-state diplomatically until 1974 – during these years of non-recognition, imported magazines and atlases would have the name ‘Bangladesh’

crossed out in black ink by the government censors. For someone still in middle school, this was all very puzzling and unsettling. And when I studied in the United States during the 1980s, I visited Karachi regularly during summer and winter breaks. From the mid-1980s, I began photographing the architecture and streets of Karachi extensively, in black and white and in colour, using mostly medium format cameras.

Elizabeth grew up on the West Coast of the United States and studied in San Francisco during the 1980s, in an environment that had been deeply transformed by political and social activism from the late 1960s onwards, and was characterised by profound skepticism regarding the imperialist role of the United States during the late Cold War. At the SFAI, she developed a practice of conceptual sculpture informed by popular culture. Elizabeth had been inspired by the faculty and alumni at SFAI, such as Stan Brakhage, Larry Sultan, George Kuchar, Jay DeFeo, and Paul McCarthy. She had studied with African-American painter Robert Colescott, among the first critical appropriation artists, who parodied racial stereotypes in history paintings. She was looking closely at Minimalism, Funk art, and Conceptual art, especially the work of West Coast artists. The work of Paul McCarthy, with its astute take on the excesses of American mass media, Hollywood B movies, comics, and theme parks like Disneyland, was especially engaging.

During the 1990s when we both lived in Karachi, I was closely reading new developments in theory, including the work of the Subaltern Studies collective, the revival of German critical theory, the new anthropology of modernity in *Public Culture*, and debates on modern art and its institutions in *Third Text*. I was also looking at art and architecture – Andy Warhol’s *Death and Disaster* series, the photography of Bernd & Hilla Becher, and brutalist, ‘Punjabi Baroque,’ Bollywood and Lollywood architecture and set designs. Both of us shared an interest in Surrealism, Dada, Arte Povera, and the films of Satyajit Ray, Visconti, and Chris Marker.

We had both thus arrived at a juncture where we understood that the art of the present needs to address these quandaries of the self in a divided world. Our collaborative practice for two decades can be placed at the intersection of conceptual art, pop art, and popular culture. The latter term denotes not only the art of mass culture in postindustrial societies, but also the rich materiality of urban street life in cities of the Global South, and especially in South Asia, whose informal realms possess productive and creative resources that merit engagement by artists and scholars. Our practice examines both the blindness of official narratives, and the spectacular immersions of popular cultures, by bringing conceptual rigor to a dialogue with the sense and affect of the popular.

DS How was the art scene in Karachi in the 1990s, as opposed to now?

ID The city was largely first developed in the mid-nineteenth century, and saw the biggest transfer of population in South Asia, in terms of percentage, at Partition. As such, no one claims deep ownership in terms of ancestry or authenticity. It has grown uncontrollably over the last seventy years, has many diverse communities, an amnesiac history and memory, and voracious commercial energy. The focus in Karachi remains largely urban, and concerned with the recent past and present.

Even before returning to live full-time in Karachi in 1990, we had been thinking about the relation of art to popular culture, and how the productive capacities of industry, ‘urban crafts’, and media were reconfiguring how art could be made and the effects it could have. In a site-specific project Elizabeth created in 1989 for example, ‘paintings’ made with commercial Christmas lights offer homage to Albert Jensen’s experiments with patterns of prismatic colour systems, as well as to Tanaka Atsuko’s *Electric Dress* (1956).

As someone who came to making art from the ‘outside’ by way of photography

(in my case), and as an outsider (an American in Elizabeth's case), we were struck by the persistent gap between the realities of a megacity like Karachi and accounts of it via the hermetic artistic strategies of late modernism being practiced there at the time. Our work continued to be transformed in a direction of engagement with the expressiveness and vitality of the street. How would we work with a fractured but stimulating public sphere in a site like Karachi? What did it mean to be an artist in a megacity that did not have a single museum of art, and hardly any galleries? The artist Ali Imam (brother of Indian artist S. H. Raza) ran his Indus Gallery from 1971 onwards—a very important gathering place. Imam *sahib* was a brilliant conversationalist, it was where we met many artists, including Francis Newton Souza and Zarina during the 1990s.

In regard to our work in 1990s Karachi, Elizabeth was making conceptual serial works in cast brass and aluminium based on popular objects, informed by gender issues, and minimalism-conceptualism. These works problematised the autonomy of the sculptural object, as they were rendered in metal sourced from recycled scrap, thematically referencing popular plastic items. They were attempting a critical dialogue with everyday lifeworlds. I was photographing Urdu films being broadcast on TV from 1990, and made a number of photographs framed in cast aluminium frames that referenced the mediation of space in Urdu cinema. I was also making experimental darkroom black-and-white photographic manipulations of Karachi imagery.

Both of our works were situated between the necessity for a critical and autonomous artistic practice, and the need to engage with popular visuality. We were deeply interested in urban vernacular technologies—not traditional craft—but a kind of 'plastic popular'. 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. The contention is that everyday experience does provide adequate ground for artistic exploration. You draw upon your recent past and what you experience around you, from an urban experience full of plastic, stainless steel, lights, vernacular architectures, and print and electronic media. And from tensions of tremendous contestation in Karachi streets, disjunctive claims based on commercial competition, and political, religious, and ethnic divisions.

The art scene was so much smaller then, and our projects were quite new to Pakistan, so the work was all more or less experimental. An important and open question was, how does art address this conflicted and dense experience of the city? We wanted to find a way to address through an ongoing and mobile practice and by trying out various tactics and strategies. In the 1990s, we were among a very small number of artists embarking on contemporary art, and there was neither critical debate within or across disciplines, nor any institutions that would support such work in Pakistan. We no longer live there, but the contemporary art scene is bigger and more complex now, and has better support.

DS In *Efflorescence* you address the potency of flowers as national symbols. You seem to ask how seemingly harmless plants can become the symbols of nationalism and other forms of identity claims. Can you tell me more about this work and about the ravage of nationalism in South Asia? How does it help relate to other forms of nationalism elsewhere across the globe?

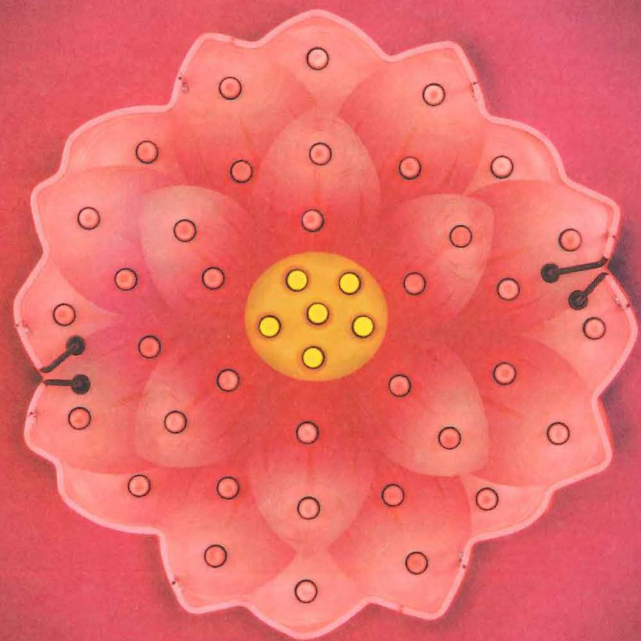
ID The *Efflorescence* series visualises the strange symbolic emblems of official imagination through a popular visual and material register. Benedict Anderson has argued that imagination plays a central role in how nationalism incorporates individuals in its projects, and the official emblems that

countries celebrate are therefore not incidental to their claim upon us. Nation-states ascribe various forms of pageantry exclusive to themselves in order to express their singularity. Among other emblems, flowers have become specific national symbols, even though they grow over a wide geographic range. As markers of national identity, they are especially arbitrary, and can truly be characterised as 'contested botanicals.'

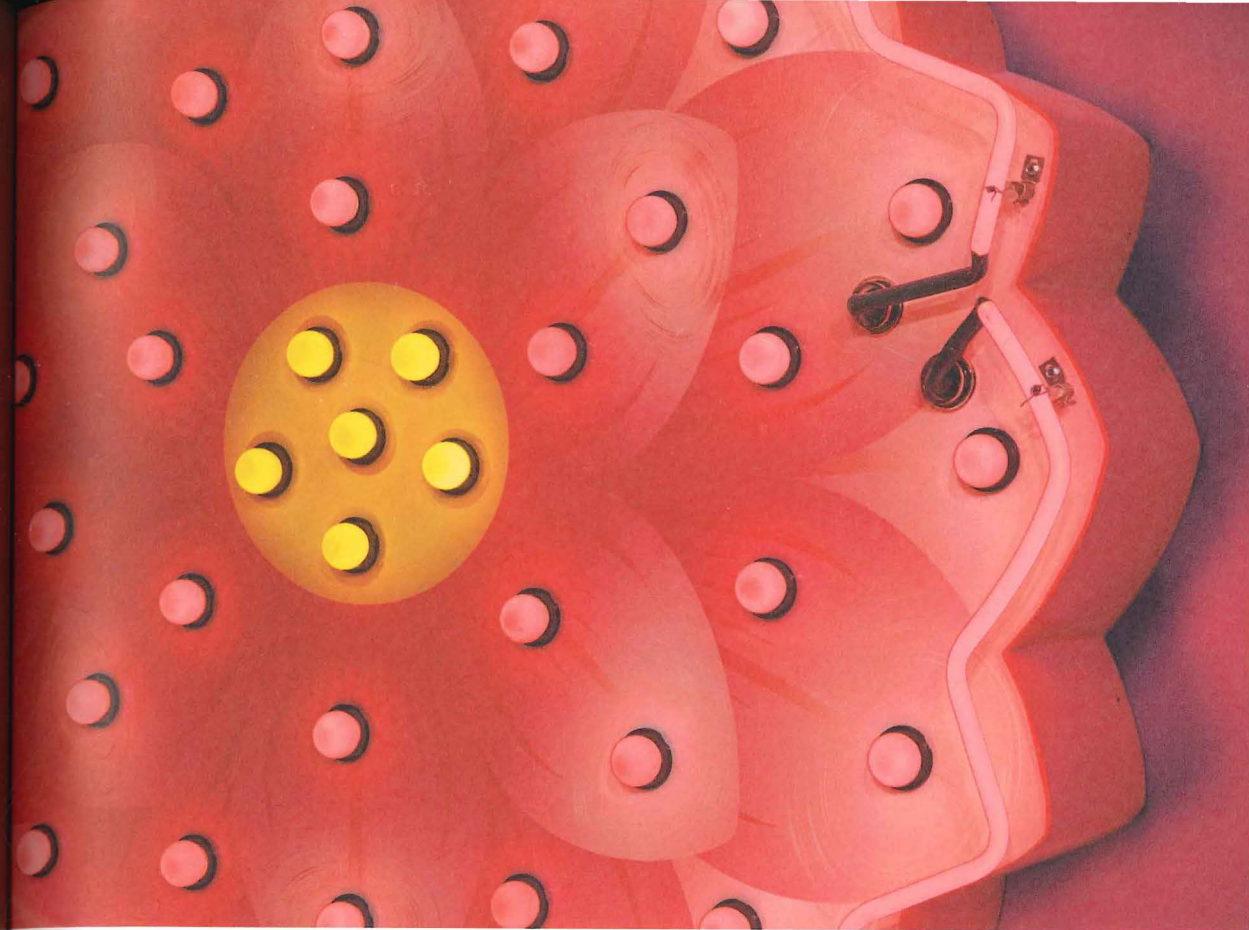
Efflorescence is inspired by the strangeness of this attribution. The word denotes the blooming of a flower and the flowering of a culture or a civilisation. Other meanings include the positive sense of glowing and being lit, but the word also bears negative valences, such as discoloration or the manifestation of a stain. The multiple connotations of the word provide an evocative title for this series, which focuses specifically on the national flowers of contested regions. Inspired by popular

commercial signage and created as large neon and incandescent works in metal, the works jump scale in their materiality and dimensions. Their graphical form and their industrial artifice acknowledge the manner in which such delicate natural forms are institutionally deployed as fixed emblems to vindicate intangible yet hard claims of identity.

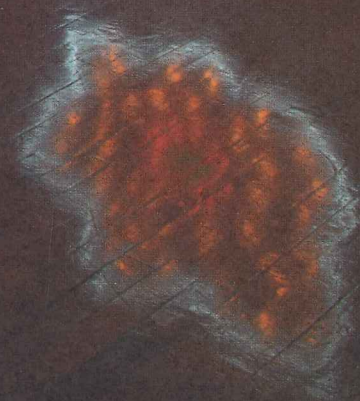
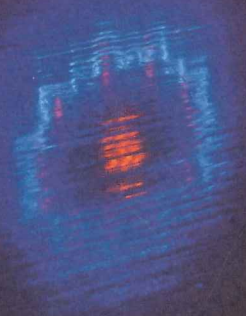
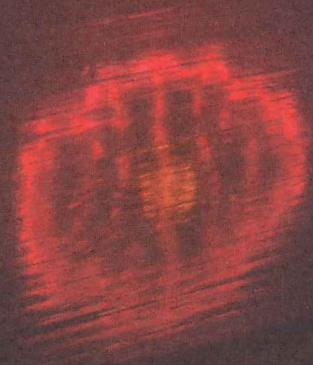
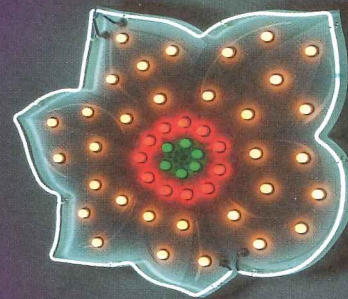
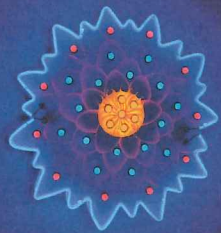
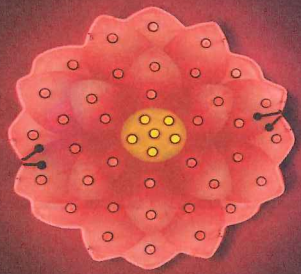
Efflorescence constitutes a chapter in our continued investigation into how our consciousness is shaped in the era of mediated biopower. Our media-saturated environment creates paradoxical effects: it legitimates official closures through the selection and repetition of powerful narrative forms and affective sensory registers. But simultaneously, popular, counterpublic, and vernacular material and media cultures persist and amplify, potentially charting new discrepant sensory and conceptual trajectories.



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