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A new exhibition at Mumbai's Jhaveri Contemporary zooms into urban objects of desire

*South Asian urban life has always fired the imagination of artists
Iftikhar Dadi and Elizabeth Dadi*

[Shaikh Ayaz](#)

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Iftikhar Dadi, a professor of Pakistani origin at Cornell University, and his American partner, Elizabeth Dadi, elevate everyday household objects to glossy glamour in 'Tilism', their latest collaborative effort on display in Mumbai | Photographer: Mohammed Chiba / Photo Courtesy: Jhaveri Contemporary

What do images of a tiffin box, table fan, the mobile phone, or the almost-extinct cassette player evoke? The humdrum march of the everyday? Sweet nostalgia? South Asian urban life and aspirations of its people have always fired the imagination of Pakistan-born Iftikhar Dadi and his American partner, Elizabeth Dadi. In 'Tilism,' an exhibition of large-format photographs at Mumbai's Jhaveri Contemporary, the New York-based couple ponder over these desire machines for a deeper meaning and a possible gateway into the subcontinent's culture. In doing so, they have uprooted the taken-for-granted objects from their prosaic origins to propel them towards 'fifteen minutes of pop art' fame.



'Tilism,' an exhibition of large-format photographs at Mumbai's Jhaveri Contemporary | Photographer: Mohammed Chiba / Photo Courtesy: Jhaveri Contemporary

Plastic Popular

A year in the making, 'Tilism' combines photographs of plastic toys — a process Iftikhar has previously dubbed “plastic popular”— from lesser-known workshops and acrylic surface-bounding to produce a thrillingly glossy finish. “It’s a reference to mid-century art historical figures and modern colour theory, especially Joseph Albers,” says Iftikhar, when asked to reflect on the slick vibrancy of his designs. All of these glossy artworks of unbranded and mysterious toys are accompanied by Urdu calligraphy. Iftikhar attributes its influence to advertising, mainly Iranian graphic design from the 1960s. The careful use of the Urdu text is reminiscent of the typographical experiments in the Arabic script (used in Arabic, Persian and Urdu) in the 1960s. “The chunky and playful typography visually anchors the object graphically,” he tells *AD*. “As an Indian, you might also be familiar with such typography in popular signage across India, in all languages and scripts.”

Intersectional Art

Answers for why he's drawn to Urdu may partly reside in his own roots. Both his India-born parents migrated to Pakistan after the Partition. His father grew up in Bombay and his mother had grown up in Lucknow and Bareilly and Urdu was her legacy. Her family, as Iftikhar says, "was deeply invested in the Urdu language and literature". Besides being an artist, Iftikhar is an academic. He teaches history of art at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. Elizabeth is a graduate from the San Francisco Art Institute (SFAI). "We think of ourselves as working at the intersection of pop art and conceptual art," declares Iftikhar, who has collaborated with Elizabeth for two decades.



Tiffen #1, part of Tilism at Jhaveri Contemporary | Image Courtesy Jhaveri Contemporary

Cultural Commonalities

Despite their cultural differences, they have been able to form a successful partnership, both in life and work. Iftikhar grew up in Karachi of the 1960s and 70s while Elizabeth grew up on the West Coast. She trained as a sculptor as opposed to Iftikhar's interest in photography. Initially, what helped, as Iftikhar explains, was Elizabeth's understanding of South Asia even before they met. Karachi was, and still, remains their muse. "Karachi does not possess a deep urban history," Iftikhar insists. "It's basically a mid-19th century city that saw the biggest transfer of population in South Asia in terms of percentage. No one claims ownership in terms of ancestry or authenticity. It has many diverse communities, an amnesiac history and memory, and voracious commercial energy. Our focus remains strictly urban, and on the recent past and present."



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Cassette Player #2, part of Tilism at Jhaveri Contemporary | Image Courtesy Jhaveri Contemporary

India Calling

The Dadis usually do not miss a chance to show in India. Just two years ago, they had exhibited a series of works at Jhaveri Contemporary, including the ‘Urdu Film Series,’ a photography project based on the Pakistan film industry. Does India inspire them? “India is so vast,” Iftikhar replies, “There is a lot of regional variation. Generally, we respond to so many things there, which seem very familiar — from everyday things like street life, music and language to intellectual and artistic concerns.”



‘Tilism’ installation view | Photographer: Mohammed Chiba / Photo Courtesy: Jhaveri Contemporary

Bollywood Dreams

He acknowledges the legacy of Bollywood on their work, particularly the ‘Urdu Film Series.’ “Bollywood is an endless source of insight for us. Hindi films are fables that distill the desires of so many across South Asia. In their sets, costumes, narratives, and characters, they both reflect and instantiate the dreams of modern urban life.” For now, he says, they will continue to focus on urban informalities. ‘Tilism’ is part of that extended investigation.”



The Pakistani-American artist couple cultivate a curious interest in South Asian mass culture | Photo Courtesy: Iftikhar Dadi

‘Tilism’ by Iftikhar Dadi and Elizabeth Dadi is on until January 5, 2019 at the Jhaveri Contemporary, a short walk from Gateway of India in Colaba, Mumbai.