

Finding The Missing One with Nada Raza, Assistant Curator at Tate Modern



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Elise Yau
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The Story of The Missing One – written in 1896 by Jagadish Chandra Bose (1858-1937) is thought to be one of the first tales of science or speculative fiction in Bangla; and *The Missing One*, a thematic exhibition curated by Nada Raza, Assistant Curator at Tate Modern soared high by taking the book name as a narrative origin. The title also serves as a poetic statement to rediscover South Asian art's prolonged and authentic artistic investigation in exploring what's beyond the sky, free and unique from the Western hegemony.

During the rare occasion of Dhaka Art Summit 2016, CoBo speaks with Nada Raza who specialises in modern and contemporary art from the Middle East and South Asia, to reveal how she captured the region's intricate cultural and social complexities by connecting art with the literary world, and bringing the contemporary voices together.

TEXT: Elise Yau

PHOTO: Courtesy of Samdani Art Foundation





(<https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Screen-Shot-2016-04-05-at-6.48.07-pm.png>)

Gaganendranath Tagore, Resurrection, courtesy of the Samdani Art Foundation Collection

To begin with, we would like to know more about the exhibition's background. As the curator, could you tell me how you came up with the idea of The Missing One in the first place?

The idea really came from research that I did in Bangladesh after the Samdani Art Foundation invited me there and gave me the resources to do field and research trips, including to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. I was already working for Tate and doing my own work because my family lives in Pakistan, so I was already travelling in India and Pakistan. The research period took a year to 18 months. I wanted a show with a literary connection because the written word, especially the book, prose, poetry and language, are really important in this part of the world. But when I travelled to Chittagong and Dhaka and met the artists, I liked their work so much it completely shifted my way of thinking. Sometimes these things are just serendipity. It all happens and falls into place quite magically, and that's how it felt with this exhibition.

I saw the Tagore painting at the Samdani's house, hanging high up with a lot of other Tagore works and couldn't help going back to it. It's such a beautiful, enigmatic work, and I wanted to know more about the subject matter. I've been a fan of Tagore since I was very little, so it's always a pleasure to see his delicate, but very modernist watercolours. In Chittagong, I met Zihan Karim who showed me his work. It was a bold, really experimental video, and I thought, 'Okay, he's a really mature young artist', and I wanted to work with him. So, I started finding these anchoring artworks and met Ronni Ahmed, who lives in a parallel universe, and I started to think about how these contemporary voices might relate. I've been researching and working with South Asian art for ten years. Sci-fi and the idea of the future is a current theme in the art world and there's been a lot of interesting things happening in the Middle East.

The artist Sophia Al Maria has done a 'Sci-Fi Wahabi' project, so I knew that a bigger counter-culture was going on. Sci-fi is an interesting genre that expresses our anxieties about modernity and the alienating encounter one has with the modern world. And arguably, in the global south, that encounter is still taking place. So, I looked at the themes of science fiction, which are often about the main protagonist going from an enchanted utopian world to a world threatened by something natural or supernatural, and being able to save the world. Often the role of some greater being is quite prominent too. So, it became an interesting theme to thoughtfully ask the question, why are science and spirituality now considered to be poles apart in South Asia?

This polarisation is quite troubling. There's a figure of Christ in the middle of Tagore's painting, 'Resurrection'. It's a biblical theme, but it's painted in this incredibly modernist idiom. If, in 1922, these two things could live together then why, almost a century later, are they seen as being so far apart? That's the question this show is asking, with science fiction as a conceit. It moves through these three or four movements. I wanted to create a space that's really distinguished from the rest of the art summit. So, by immediately creating an atmosphere and picking up the painting's colour palette, I could create a different world. Sound is really important to the show. There are tweeting birds and celestial music to change the mood when you walk in. The colours go from pale to really dark. The work shifts from being very cool and minimal to being really figurative, grotesque and strong. All of these binaries of light and dark, day and night, heaven and hell, are present in the experience of the exhibition.





(https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Ali-Kazim_Untitled_from_the_Otherland_series_2015_watercolor_and_pigment_on_paper-Height-56cm-Width-76cm-Courtesy-of-the-artist-and-Jhaveri-Contemporary-Mumbai-.jpg)

Ali Kazim, Otherland, 2015, courtesy of Samdani Art Foundation

Is there a particular scope of the time frame?

The Tagore painting is from the early 20th Century and it's a point of departure really, and then you fast forward to the beginning of the 21st Century. Like time travel.

Can you say a few words on the overall mood you have tried to create? There are also some scientific elements.

Absolutely. I want people to go through the show and build their own stories through it, and I hope that's happened. There are some amazing moments. The work 'Magic Carpet' by Iftikhar Dadi was specially made for this exhibition and is one of the focal points, or at least highlights, of the show.

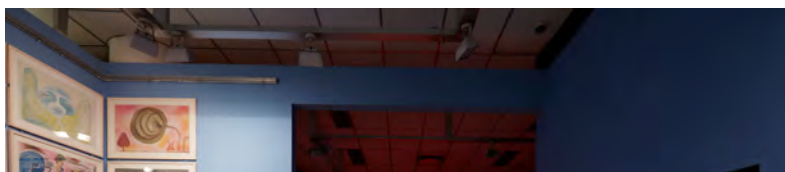
When we talk about futuristic interpretation, do you find any similarities or differences between these interpretations in the East and the West?

I'm not from the West, so I can't answer that. I'm from Pakistan, which has an incredibly complicated history with Bangladesh. I also work for a big European institution, so I'm negotiating on many fronts. One could easily be taken for a native informant, but I'm not. I chose to move to the UK because it's the only way that I could, as a Pakistani, get to travel in India and Bangladesh. There are so many problems between these countries at a diplomatic level. So, it's very easy for Tate or Pompidou Centre or any of these institutions to say South Asia, but South Asia is not that homogenous and there isn't much mobility.

Politically, the borders are very tight and it's very difficult to get visas, so it was easier to get one because I worked for Tate than it would be if I was a curator in Pakistan. A lot of my artists aren't here because there was a diplomatic impasse between the two countries before the summit. So, the things that we have to work with – the contingencies – are often very practical and political, and you have to find strategies to work together.

I was also looking at how South Asia is represented in science fiction, and my whole alienation section is to do with the idea of the foreigner. If you watch 'Avatar', the characteristics of the aliens are often Asian, Arabic or African. Even in the new 'Star Wars', the storm troopers are black, so there's racial profiling that goes on in sci-fi.

I found a book from 1952 called 'Ballroom of the Skies' which must have belonged to my parents but had slipped into my own books, and it was a magical moment. It describes a future in which India and Pakistan reunite and save the world. So in 1952, according to an American imagination, that was possible, which is quite amazing, and I wanted to put that out as a provocation.





(https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/The_Missing_One-curated_by_Nada_Raza_0851-2.jpg)

Exhibition view of The Missing One, courtesy of Samdani Art Foundation

Do you have other works in the show related to the Space Age imagination?

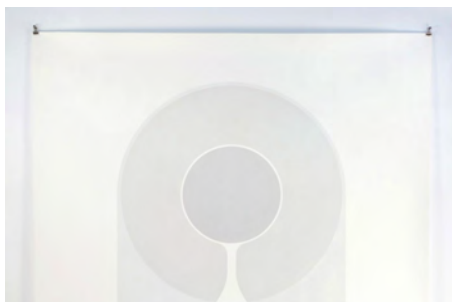
Well, the moon is referenced many times. In the first room, there's a painting of a crater, Hajra Waheed's map of the sky and David Alesworth's Probes, which are rockets. 'Magic Carpet' is supposed to be a transcendental carpet, a version of The Arabian Nights, but it's based on the prayer rug. There are also little models of spacecraft by Ronni Ahmed and a flying saucer from a very local point of view.

In the last film, there's a video called 'Moon Burning'. This bears a relationship to the moving and breathing Ganesh God, that's supposed to be half-moon shaped. So, it's not necessarily space age or the imagination of other space, but comes from an older, maybe even mythological perspective. Mehreen Murtaza's body of work, for example, is a kind of shrine around the figure of Abdus Salam, a Pakistani nuclear physicist who won the Nobel Prize in the fifties. He's been deliberately obscured because he was from the Ahmadi faith and the Pakistani State declared that Ahmadiyya were non-Muslims. There's a huge amount of discrimination against them, people have been killed. You have to sign a declaration on the Pakistani passport form that says, "I believe that Ahmadis are non-Muslims", and so it's a shrine to Abdus Salam to acknowledge that this is a problem.

Are there some tips that you can share with us in order to better understand contemporary art from the region?

I think you have to be specific in your research and accept that your works operate at two different registers, and a local audience will understand them in a different way. But hopefully, the artwork has enough to offer and someone who hasn't experienced the same reality as the artist can still enter and understand it. It's hard to speak generally about this because it's easier when you're talking about a specific practice and I think that's actually the thing with this late modernism in this part of the world. It's something that you immediately recognise for what it is. When you step outside of that it gets more complicated, and if you look at the history of performance art in Bangladesh, the influences really come from engagement with Japan. It has nothing to do with performance in Europe or North America, but a really interesting relationship that is peculiarly Asian.

Bangladesh is a new country, founded in 1971, so modernist architecture and the architecture of a new nation has been an important part of its development. I think you have to learn about more than just the art, there's also the language, literature or just the sphere within which these artists are working. I find repeated studio visits helpful, to continue the conversation and meet people in different contexts. Sometimes seeing an exhibition is quite different from walking with the artist through their city and talking to them, just experiencing the world in which their work is produced. Too often, our research methodology is hasty. I think there's a danger of being superficial with a lot of contemporary curatorial research and I try really hard not to be.





(<https://www.cobosocial.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Fahd-Burki-Saint-2011-courtesy-of-the-artist-and-Grey-Noise.jpg>)

Fahd Burki, Saint, 2011, Courtesy of the artist and Grey Noise

What do you think of the international interest today in contemporary art from Asia, South Asia or South East Asia?

Things like the summit generate this excitement. It's also about being a host, which is very much a part of our culture. So I think it goes both ways; it's not just that people are finally arriving, it's also that the arms are finally open. These places are becoming confident enough about their own practice to say, "Come, check it out, there's a reason to be here." Like in Pakistan, where they now have the local biennale and Karachi biennale. There will be a lot more activity in places where people were a bit hesitant to visit before, either for logistical or financial reasons, or language or accessibility issues. It's not just that there's more interest, it's also become more accessible, thanks to the internet and Instagram. I think there's also that formal thing of, "Everybody's there, we should go too." It's good there is a lot of hype for all these young artists who are getting to see... It's so hard for a young Asian male to get a visa to travel to the West, so this is giving them the experience of seeing contemporary world class art. This is not just for us to take a look at. It is also for a local audience to have access to, and that's really important.

Thank you.

About Nada Raza

Nada Raza works on acquisitions, displays and exhibitions at Tate Modern with a particular focus on modern and contemporary art from South Asia. She is the Assistant Curator for the South Asian Acquisitions Committee, working on major acquisitions from India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka with a group of twenty to twenty-five patrons. She has also worked towards the development of a collections strategy for Tate's ongoing engagement with artists from South Asia. She contributed to the exhibition *Meschac Gaba: Museum of Contemporary African Art* (2013) at Tate Modern and managed its tour to Deutsche Bank KunstHalle (2014).

Specialises in modern and contemporary art from the Middle East and South Asia and its diaspora, particularly India and Pakistan. She travels regularly within South Asia for historical research and keeps up to date with contemporary artistic production. She was selected to be the curator of the Abraaj Prize Capital Art Prize 2014 and has been invited to curate a thematic exhibition for the Dhaka Art Summit in Bangladesh in 2016.

Elise YAU (Editor of CoBo)

Elise YAU is an editor and journalist specialises in design, lifestyle and luxury topics. She has written extensively for Ming Pao Weekly, City Magazine and HK01, and she is the author of book projects regarding design, architecture and Hong Kong culture. Currently based in Hong Kong, Elise is immersing the art world after joining CoBo, the first Asia community platform for collectors.

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