

Visual Arts

Across great divides: art from Pakistan, Bangladesh and India

A group show in Cambridge tackles potentially fraught subject matter with subtlety rather than bombast



'Argument from Silence (broken limb)' by Seher Shah (2019) © Green Art Gallery and Nature Morte

Rachel Spence NOVEMBER 15 2019

The photograph shows an ancient Buddhist statue on a plinth that seems to float against the museum's cracked grey wall. Suspended in front of the sculpture a ghostly white screen of vertical lines defies rational explanation. The image, by artist Seher Shah, combines drawing and photogravure; it is part of her new series, *Argument from Silence* (2019), taken of Gandhara sculptures in the government Museum and Art Gallery in Chandigarh, India. From an ancient region on the border of present-day Pakistan and Afghanistan, Gandhara art has a contested history that reflects the shifting borders of the region.

Whisper-quiet in its subtle monochrome mystery, yet hiding a cacophony of internal stories, *Argument from Silence* encapsulates the mood of *Homelands*, a new exhibition at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge of work by artists with links to Pakistan, Bangladesh and India.

Certain threads lead all the way home. In 1917, the founder of Kettle's Yard, the British collector Jim Ede, travelled to India to oversee an army school for non-commissioned officers. As an adjunct to the exhibition, an archival display of letters and photographs, curated with sensitivity by Alina Khakoo, unfolds Ede's bittersweet experience of a country where, he admits, he never spoke to an Indian "unless he was a servant", yet which had "the most reverberations" of any period on his life.

Ede's chapter is one in a much bigger story that saw more than 1m south Asian soldiers voyage westwards to fight for the British empire in the first world war. As such, it is a microcosm of one of the myriad strands that knot this region, and the UK's relationship with it, into a cats' cradle of narrative and counter-narrative.

Today, the identity of all three countries is bound up with the legacy of Partition in 1947 and the Bangladesh Liberation War in 1971. And the phenomenon of contemporary migration from south Asia adds another layer to a fluctuating palimpsest of rootlessness and belonging. Faced with such combustible material, curator Devika Singh judiciously chooses a less-is-more approach. The exhibition encompasses just 11 artists (two of them, Iftikhar Dadi & Elizabeth Dadi, work as a pair). And they all prefer inquiry to bombast, travelling through the faultlines of their complex subject matter rather than tackling it head on.

For "Spring Song" (2019), a series of photographs taken in the Rohingya refugee camps in southern Bangladesh, the Dhaka-based photographer Munem Wasif made images not of the men and women he interviewed but of their objects — an old cell phone; black-and-white family photographs; a small, cracked, colourful bottle, perhaps of perfume, which gives the work its title. Centred with reverent precision against plain backgrounds, these humble items become numinous messengers for their owners' tortured journeys.

In the catalogue, Wasif says that he constantly asks himself: “What happens when you don’t see obvious images?” As if responding, the Delhi-based Magnum photographer Sohrab Hura has created *Snow*, a series shot in Kashmir since 2014. In the catalogue, Hura explains that the title is a reference to the habit of Indian tourists of visiting Kashmir “to experience snowfall . . . encouraged [by] the Indian government as it allows [them] to softly stake claim” on the land and ramps up the local economy’s dependence on India.



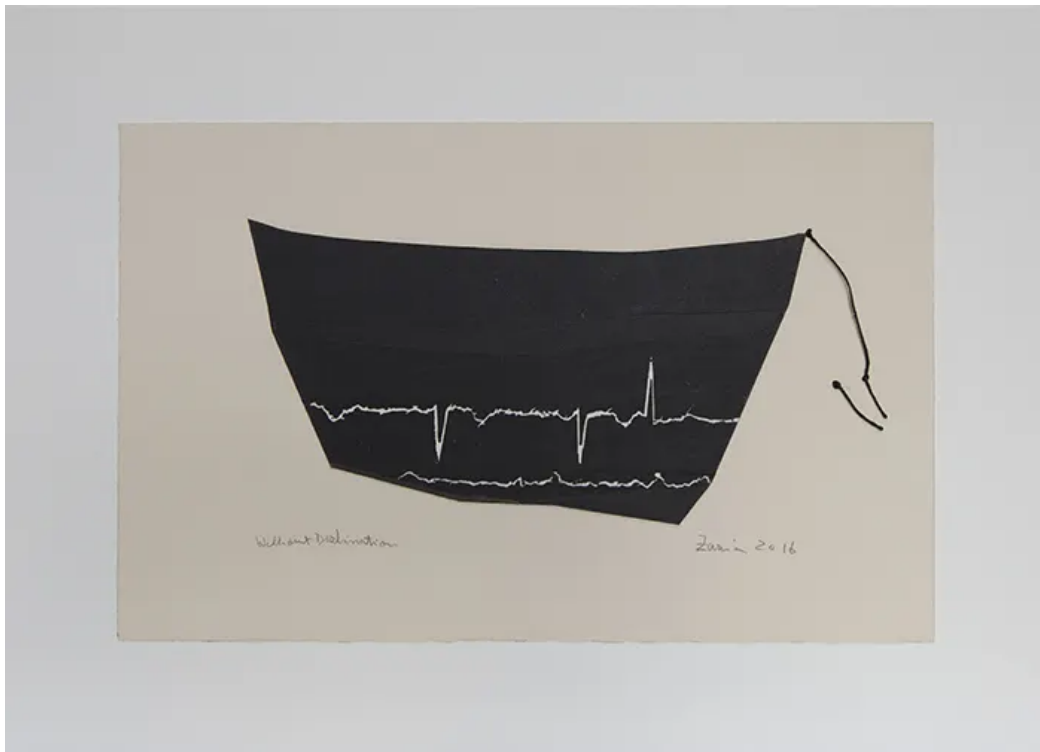
From ‘Snow’ by Sohrab Hura (2014) © Sohrab Hura/Experimenter

Hura makes good use of the icy weather. A picture of a young girl lying on the grass with a lump of snow over her eyes is a nod to the blinding of children by police as they fired pellets into protesters in 2016. Resistant to his “rabidly nationalist” government’s expectation that he “claim Kashmir as my own”, most of Hura’s images — all of which are captionless — convey his own sense of estrangement rather than attempting to capture any autonomous Kashmiri “essence”. A solitary woman on a snowbound road covers her cheek as if rejecting his camera. The purpose of a hazardous row of stones placed across a deserted rural road is left a mystery (though this gappy barrier also hints that even the most apparently intransigent border is ultimately porous).

Few artists have created such a restrained yet impassioned visual memoir of their dislocation as Zarina (previously known as Zarina Hashmi). Born in Aligarh, India in 1937, her essay in the catalogue recounts her peregrinations — from Partition, when she and her family fled her burning birthplace haunted by the “smell of rotting flesh”, to long-term residency in New York, where in 1998 the near loss of her Chelsea apartment due to gentrification feels like a final, excruciating twist (she won the right to remain but is now based in London).

Zarina condenses this fractured world into glimpses of pain, endurance and enlightenment that lure the imagination more effectively than any overt exclamation. Working, as she does often, on small woodblock prints in black and cream, her 2003 sequence “These Cities Blotted into the Wilderness (Adrienne Rich after Ghalib)” transforms maps of embattled cities, from Ahmedabad to Beirut and Jenin, into webs and grids that — though based on official versions — are made illegible by erasures that reflect historic trauma.

Equally reserved is the thread of hope in Zarina’s more recent work “Without Destination” (2016). These two small paper collages of boats — one black, one white — bob helplessly on their featureless seas, yet they invite us to grasp the string cord that trails from one stern.



'Without Destination' by Zarina (2016) © Jeanne Bucher/Jaeger, Paris

For anchoring us once more in Cambridge's fenland landscape we must thank Desmond Lazaro. Born in Leeds to parents whose ancestral roots lay in India but who migrated to the UK from Burma in the 1950s, Lazaro is now based between Pondicherry and Melbourne. He devoted 12 years to studying the art of miniature painting in Jaipur, a traditional technique he now channels into work of acute contemporary resonance. For *Homelands*, Lazaro took on a three-month residency in Cambridge to interview local people, including those from Hungary, Chile, the US and Bangladesh, about their own experiences of migration and settlement.

Lazaro's quartet of spare, diminutive paintings are based on telling details from the accounts he heard. Perhaps most affecting is a plain gold panel, its technique based on icon painting, in which floats the tiny portrait of an elderly man from Bangladesh. Lazaro interviewed the man's granddaughter, who, though she did not tell him why her grandfather never travelled to the UK with the rest of the family, did allow him to copy a surviving passport photo.

It's hard not to be moved by this little picture. What should be a symbol of transit has become a testament to the road not travelled, the frontier not crossed. The old man's absence underlines, as Zarina puts it, that "home isn't bricks and walls. Home is other people."

To February 2, kettlesyard.co.uk

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