

Dopahar: The Home Totem

The subject of Saira Ansari's musings is New York-based Zarina Hashmi, who goes by her first name, and was born to a Muslim family in India, which she left in her early twenties. The artwork in focus is *Home is a Foreign Place*, a minimalist grid of 36 woodblock prints, each featuring an abstract geometric design paired with an Urdu word such as 'threshold,' 'axis' and 'distance' – idea-images that express the artist's relationship to home, the house she never returned to, to language and loss.

Words by Saira Ansari

"I can't think of an afternoon in India without a ceiling fan."

Zarina in conversation with Alexander Fang for INSIDE/OUT – A MoMA/MoMA PS1 Blog, in *At Home with Zarina*, November 2010.

The ceiling fan encapsulates the most sublime form of my yearning for home. When I picture the slow rotating blades and the low, soporific sounds they make (woaow-woaow-woaow...), I am transported to summer afternoons in Lahore; hundreds of them – all of them the same in my memory now – ubiquitously bathed in slanted sunlight streaming through the big windows, a thick heat permeating from the glass. I'm in the centre of this reverie, in a post-lunch state of lethargy. Lying on a cool, crisp, light blue bedsheet, I track the black dot at the edge of one of the dusty blades go round and round, circumambulating its way across the ceiling of my mother's room. Everything swelters gently.

Once I wrote a small text about an afternoon such as this, and those who read it mentioned the visceral response they felt when they got to the part about the ceiling fan nudging a sheaf of newspaper sheets off a table, which then cascaded to the floor. Heavy, slow motion, laden with sensorial details, the ceiling fan was their totem for *back home in Pakistan*. Just like it is mine.

I first encountered *Home is a Foreign Place* at the house of Smita Prabhakar a few years ago, and I returned many times later, having forged a relationship to other artworks that were part of Smita's collection. It was the only collection of contemporary Indian art I had seen in UAE. Zarina's 36 woodcut prints quietly ruminated from one of the corner walls of the living room and stood out amongst the paintings and sculptures around it. In its monochromatic entity was folded the story of millions of people that were made homeless or stateless by the 1947 partition of India and

Pakistan, yet it somehow managed to narrate this through the personal nostalgia of the artist who is unable to return to her childhood home.

The more I read about Zarina – her stories mostly always mapped out in cartographies of homes, families and countries left behind – the more I appreciated the sensitivity of her images, which never really yield to mawkish sentimentality. And while she employs sculptural practices as well, it has been her obsessive engagement with paper – printing on top, or simply crushing it for texture – and the consistent use of black ink, that has produced her most recognizable imagery.

In person, I had only ever seen her *Letters from Home* series before: prints using original letters written to Zarina by her sister Rani, providing an invasive glance into her life. But *Home is a Foreign Place* is different – it is personal, yet an abstract distillation, in a pictographic lexicon of words that Zarina thought of, when she thought of home, and note by note it walked me through all 36 of them. Each individual Urdu word inked is accompanied by a stripped-down, minimalist imagining of lines and archetypal forms, the maps and architectural representations of memory – and together they play like shadows of the houses and stories left behind. Within the larger work, for me, the poignancy of the image titled *Dopahar* is in the realization that this is the story of my yearning too.

Home is a Foreign Place is a key work in the Dubai-based Ishara Art Foundation collection, which will open an Alserkal Avenue exhibition space dedicated to art and artists from South Asia to the public in spring 2019.



Zarina. *Afternoon*. From the portfolio *Home is a Foreign Place*. 1999. Portfolio of 36 woodcuts with Urdu text printed in black on Kozo paper and mounted on Somerset paper. Edition of 25 and 5 Roman Numeral sets. 20.32 x 15.24 cm (image), 40.64 x 33.02 cm (each sheet). © Zarina. Image courtesy of the artist and Luhring Augustine, New York



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