

# canvas

ART AND CULTURE FROM THE MIDDLE EAST AND ARAB WORLD



## WHOSE EAST IS IT ANYWAY?

Art Basel Hong Kong • Sharjah Biennial 14 • Ishara Art Foundation •  
Jameel Arts Centre • Osage Art Foundation

Almagul Menlibayeva • Kamrooz Aram • Nikhil Chopra • Soundwalk Collective •  
Umber Majeed • Augustine Paredes • Seher Shah •  
Soraya Sharghi • Tuan Andrew Nguyen • Vivek Vilasini

Saira Ansari • Yaminay Chaudhri • Shumon Basar • Deepak Unnikrishnan



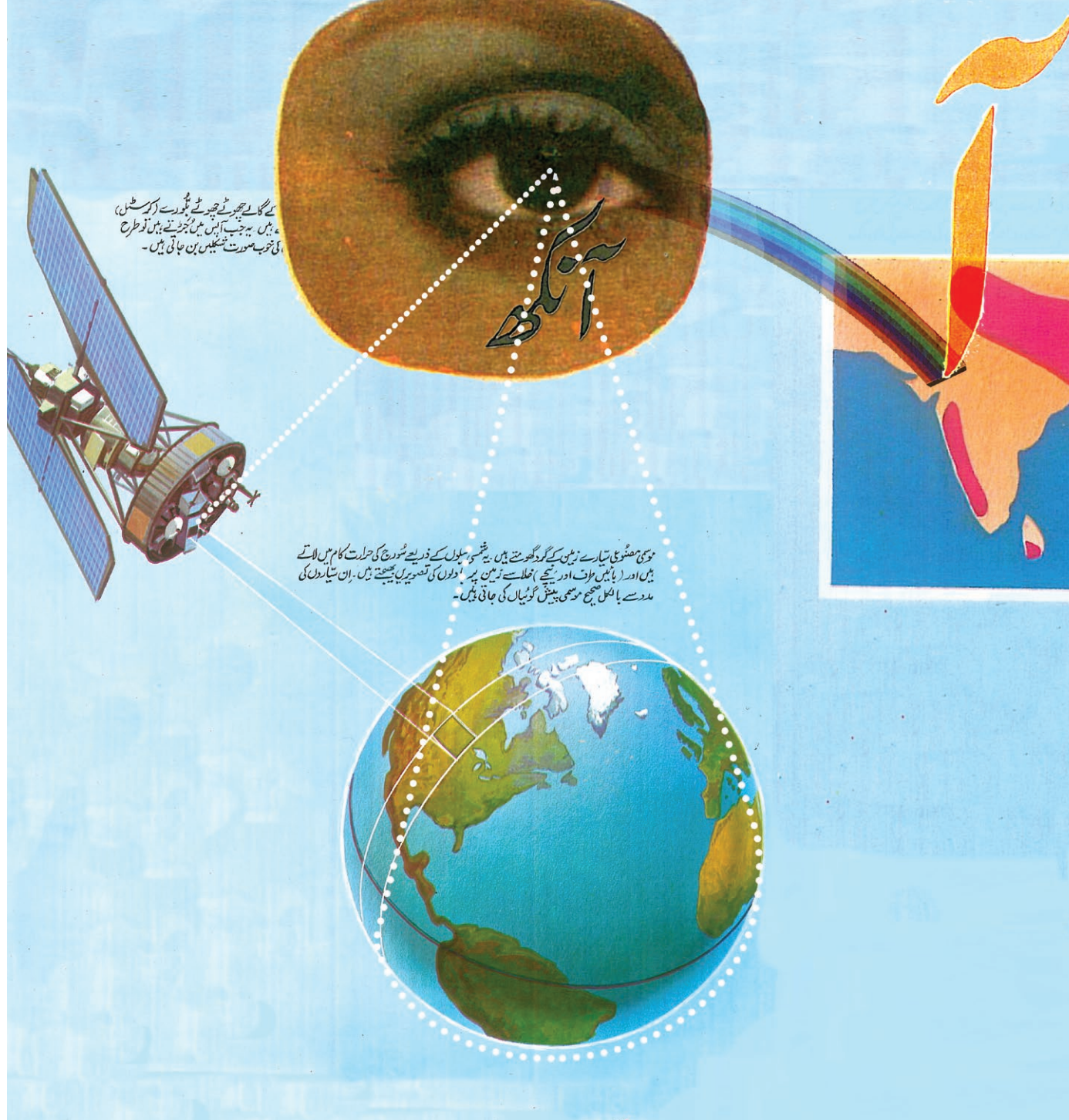
# WHOSE EAST IS IT ANYWAY?

In this issue, we further articulate the parallels and divergences between the Middle East, South and Southeast Asia. Linked by history, trade and cultural flows, these regions are all faced with breaking down notions of singular identity. We look at the institutionalizing of Asian visual culture in the Gulf, with the arrival of the Ishara Art Foundation and recent exhibitions at Alserkal Avenue's Concrete and Jameel Arts Centre. Meanwhile, the ongoing Sharjah Biennial 14 examines the larger human condition that spans continents and territories. Writer Stephanie Bailey looks at China's cultural positioning in the Global South, while Art Basel Hong Kong expands its connections to different parts of Asia. Saira Ansari responds to Umber Majeed's project on rapid urbanization that translates across geographies, while Payal Uttam looks at connections between the countries of the Global South.

<b>Sharjah Rundown</b>	<b>52</b>
<b>Hong Kong De-centres at Art Basel</b>	<b>62</b>
<b>South by Southeast</b>	<b>66</b>
<b>A Central Asian Imaginary</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>New Frontiers from Dhaka</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>Brutalism and the South Asian Discourse at Jameel Arts Centre</b>	<b>78</b>
<b>One-on-Ones</b>	<b>82</b>
<b>The Road to China</b>	<b>96</b>
<b>Umber Majeed: The Global Village</b>	<b>100</b>
<b>Deepak Unnikrishnan's <i>Temporary People</i></b>	<b>104</b>
<b>Empty Plots and Territorial Dreams</b>	<b>106</b>
<b>Ishara Art Foundation Opens</b>	<b>108</b>
<b>Soraya Sharghi's Renditions of Cultural Hybridity</b>	<b>112</b>

Isabel Lewis, Matthew Lutz-Kinoy,  
HACKLANDER / HATAM. *Untitled (inwardness,  
juice, natures)*. 2019. Performance and mixed  
media installation with audio installation, palm  
stumps, acrylic paint on muslin, ceramic cups,  
coloured acrylic sheets, dimensions variable.  
Installation view: Sharjah Biennial 14: *Leaving  
the Echo Chamber*. Commissioned by Sharjah  
Art Foundation. Image courtesy of the artists  
and Sharjah Art Foundation





Umber Majeed. *Trans-Pakistan Zindabad (Long Live Trans-Pakistan)*. 2018. Research project-animation, lecture performance, digital phone application. A4 digital collage. Image courtesy of the artist

## SUSPENDED OCTOPUSES, FLOATING HUMANS

NYC-based Pakistani artist Umber Majeed has a performative aesthetic that conflates lo-fi pop culture, archival photographs, pseudo-scientific diagrams and green screens. The arcs of her research connect nationalist discourse and digital poetry with nuclear states and feminist histories. A recent artist-in-residence at Jameel Arts Centre, Majeed is investigating flows of tourism both within Pakistan and without, in an analysis of gentrification, escapism and futurity.

Words by Saira Ansari



Umber Majeed. Canal outside Bahria Town Lahore, Pakistan. Site Documentation. Image courtesy of the artist



Umber Majeed. *Body of Water*. 2015. Still from single-channel video. 09:01. Image courtesy of the artist

*The new age and era of the earth's rotation is here. / The Earth is spinning backwards / A sudden change in direction / No longer is the planet moving from the west to the east but from the east to west. / The Sun and the Moon will rise in the West and settle in the East.*

The imaginaries that govern artist Umber Majeed's world comprise a seemingly impossible Phantasmagoria. She uses digital interventions to create lo-res, faux-70s-circa print imagery/windows98 graphics mixed with amateur documentary footage for her animations, which generously feature elements like disembodied eyes and hands blinking, floating, waving nonchalantly. She punctuates her practice with deadpan lecture-performances and online takeovers that bank heavily on 'kitsch-tech' (which should be a term). Through these busy, jarring deliveries, Majeed narrates an alternate telling of Pakistani social, cultural, religious and military history and possible futures. Points of reference in her work include nuclear bomb testing sites and monuments, aspirational architecture for Gulf-returnees, and the objectives of a failed tourism company

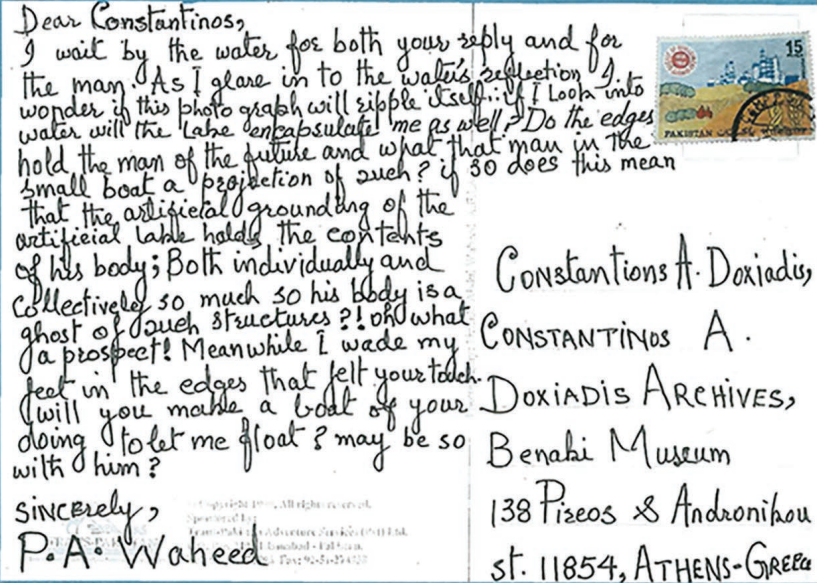
led by an uncle who believed in something more.

*Bahria – the naval – a voyager, the creator of ripples within water has come to land – transcending natural frontiers. / No horizon in sight. Simultaneously springing up from beneath the ground and falling from the sky. / Making the atmosphere and earth one. An Absolute one-ness.*

In February, Majeed presented a reading at Jameel Arts Centre on her research project *Trans-Pakistan Zindabad (Long Live Trans-Pakistan)*, based on the speculation surrounding Pakistan's Bahria Town housing scheme, seen through the lens of rapid, unsustainable urbanization in the country. In a seemingly expanded version of Dubai's Falcon City of Wonders (though in no way connected), the privately run housing scheme has spread its network far and wide in six locations across the country. An aggressive strategy (building a private city in Karachi the size of Washington DC, mostly through the illegal appropriation of land, according to sources), led by a self-styled mafioso-philanthropist leader, is part of what keeps it in the



HIGHLIGHT



Umber Majeed. *Dear Constantinos*. 2017. Photographic print. 42 cm in x 29.5 cm

news. What keeps Bahria Town in the hearts and minds of people, however, is the altogether carnivalesque form of urban planning. It is this reality on the ground that helps fuel the ‘bizarre’ element of Majeed’s practice.

*Bahria exclaims: “The replicas that are built today are the heritage for tomorrow”.*

Bahria Town has erected an Eiffel Tower in Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad, with each of these ‘chain cities’ also boasting models of Trafalgar Square, Egyptian pyramids and sphinxes (or cats, as the Bahria website calls them), Deira Clock Tower and the Statue of Liberty. In the neighbourhoods surrounding these monuments, thematic villas correspond to the history and style of the replicas. It may sound like the twilight zone, or urban planning on steroids, but the growing popularity of these mini-cities is undeniable. In the face of growing uncertainty and political upheavals, private land development is big business in Pakistan, promising a secure, gated haven. But unlike Bahria, very

few developments have the means to guarantee unrestricted supply of water and electricity. The unique ‘international’ features added to the package creates a sense of worldliness, elevating Bahria to the assumed lifestyle of a higher income bracket. So far, Bahria claims to have housed a million people, and to have built a few ‘millions of kilometres’ of roads to connect them all.

*Lahore is a city that beckons outsiders to its past. The urban fabric contains temporal compression, spatial transformation, and rapid travel through flyovers, woven with heritage sites as many other Global South metropolises.*

Majeed’s work is rooted in the wider context of state-controlled/ aided development in post-9/11 Pakistan: a time of aspirations mixed with the heady sweat of national pride and piety. It’s a world in which the visitor’s path is both uncertain and complex. She channels her uncle’s unsuccessful tourism venture *Trans-Pakistan Adventure Services* to imagine a VR-like experience delivered through ‘Eye-Planet’ – the



Umber Majeed. *Memories Fade... But Photographs Shouldn’t* (detail). 2016. Screenshot from single-channel animation. 04:27. Image courtesy of the artist

always-activated mobile phone application remains in conversation with the visitor while walking them through Bahria, ‘a sight of sites’. Image after image, Majeed exposes us to the aesthetics of a new kind of urban development taking over Pakistan and, as research shows, other South Asian countries with a similarly high number of Gulf ‘returnees’ (also known as ‘Dubai>Returns’ in Pakistan).

*The return migration of bodies and capital paralleled the emergence of Bahria.*

Following the late 20th-century increase in skilled and unskilled labour migration from East to West, and once Pakistani migrants began to make bank in the Gulf (currency conversion wealth can cause such delusions), a regular stream of funds into the country enabled instantaneous upward mobility for relatives and returned retirees alike. Transformative urban landscapes help fill the gap between the struggling past and the successful future, and those who still live and work in Pakistan flock towards these sites, these icons of national achievement. The Eiffel Tower casts its shadow across acres of developing land and cement houses in various shades of construction undress, serving as the unlikely beacon of accomplishment and a symbol of hope for a restful and respectful retirement earned by hard graft.

It is more than just a billable aesthetic, though. Majeed dabbles with the idea that this also marks the pivoting of the East-West axis to a new alignment by breaking the hold over visa hegemony and enabling the rejected to enjoy the sights of the world at a fraction of the cost.

*OVER THE SEA – into an overseas enclave. The collapse of land and sea at your doorstep. A “return to roots” signal for all.*

Drive along the wide, garbage-free, tree-lined avenues, and out through the elaborate gates of Bahria Lahore and you exit this Island of Everything into the Great Outside. Here, Majeed documents, a small canal runs alongside the walls and the roads become narrow and crowded. Someone, not Bahria, has tried to let the wondrous monumental offerings seep through for the enjoyment of the general population. Outside, budgets are low but wants many – and so, instead of sturdy metallic structures fabricated to perfection, the canal hosts a parade of painted fibreglass animals, hundreds of them smiling with glazed eyes at the passersby. Outside is where you meet the friendly bright-blue suspended octopuses – hundreds of them.

Like a colophon to Majeed’s study of a psychosomatic society in a state of denial, a single-channel video work from 2015 sums up the various threads of her investigation. In *Body of Water* (2015), the camera remains static. We see two men sprawled on a large sheet on the ground. The green screen cloth reflects the rippling blue sea and sounds of lapping water, or maybe a dripping tap over an overfilled bucket. The men start a writhing act that mimics swimming, urgently pushing through a fictional sea that threatens to drown them if they stop. They squirm, thrash and wiggle around for nine minutes until the video ends or loops again. And in this perpetual dance, the bodies have not actually moved forward, or back. They are right where they started, struggling with the sea, their mobility and their desires.

*An important ocean current has disappeared from the Atlantic Ocean / A different current is surfacing; / travelling from the Pacific to the Indian ocean and then further. / The Arabian sea is now responsible for distributing heat around the globe.*