

# ART

Monthly

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**Bani Abidi**  
interviewed by Virginia Whiles

**Role Play: Having a Larp**  
Sarah Jury

**Net Art: Beyond Description**  
Morgan Quaintance

**Meriem Bennani**  
Profile by Kashif Sharma-Patel



Sitting behind and slicing the exhibition space diagonally in two is the work *Five Digital Portraits*, 2016, by Fernández Raggio, a five-channel video displayed on monitors with purpose-built benches to encourage viewers to watch all of the roughly one-minute-long videos. Filmed in their homes, gardens and workplaces, the videos depict the past five presidents of Uruguay, Julio María Sanguinetti, Luis Alberto Lacalle, Jorge Batlle, José Mujica and Tabaré Vázquez, all of whom have spent time in power since the end of the country's civic-military dictatorship in 1985 (the year of the artist's birth). A white light flashes, processing thousands of images as a handheld scanner is used to create 3D renderings of each former president. Within this somewhat formal setting, the artist is present in the background. Fernández Raggio makes note of the relevance of her appearance in this political space as a female artist – addressing what is commonly thought of as unacceptable in Uruguay. Also noticeable are the almost unheard voices of each former statesman, instead replaced by the artist's relationship with politics over the past 34 years.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, depictions of the Americas were carried back to Europe to promote colonial progression, often illustrating violence, savagery and brutality enforced by first-nation Americans and calculated to create a manipulated, misinformed narrative of hatred and violence. In a pair of drawings titled *The allegorical body of America*, 2018, derived from these very subjects, the original being part of the British Museum's collection, Monzillo has remade a series of etchings as wall-based prints but with the figures erased. For Monzillo, the work is a poetic attempt to reclaim a mendacious storyline which bred racism and a fear of indigenous people, and instead to protect those who suffered the execrable torment of ethnic cleansing.

As rich as the show itself is the standalone publication featuring in-depth interviews with each artist and texts by author Jen Calleja, University of Birmingham's Lorraine Ryan, writer Federica Buetti and Grand Union's programme director Kim McAleese, each exploring radical ideas of disappearance in relation to consciousness. Alongside this is a public programme with Art Night's artistic director Helen Nisbet, the Welsh pavilion at The Venice Biennale curator Sophie Williamson and artist Paul Eastwood.

Hobson's ambitious project is as punchy as it is sentimental. Starting with a series of studio visits in Montevideo and Buenos Aires, it manifests as an exhibition navigating the difficulties of historical legacies, affective labour and misrepresentation in Latin America and, further, their relationship to Europe. Obvious similarities are apparent in more immediate locales: in Birmingham, the demographic of artists is far from an accurate representation of the city's diversity, and has somewhat regressed from the values taught by BLK Art Group, Maxine Walker and Vanley Burke. 'And what it became is not what it is now,' successfully retells stories, teaching us an urgent lesson in untying history to redefine legacy.

**Thomas Ellmer** is a curator based in Birmingham.



Ram Rahman, *Gents Urinal, Delhi, 1991*

## Body Building

Ishara Art Foundation, Dubai  
12 September to 14 December

A giant, semi-naked South Asian man flexes his muscles in black and white and stares down at the gallery and the normal-sized, full-colour people who peer back up. Sporting a brooding expression, his thumbs punch up while his ripped abs sit atop tight-fitting briefs and a wrestling belt. The image, a blown-up version of a photograph by Ram Rahman, features a hand-painted cut-out of famed Indian wrestler Dara Singh jutting up from the ground. It was shot in 1983, the year of Singh's last tournament before retirement. His is one of many faces in the exhibition 'Body Building' that look back at the viewer, watching us watch them. It is disconcerting.

'Body Building' marks the second show at Ishara Art Foundation, the youngest non-profit art institution in the UAE and, with its focus on South Asia, the only one of its kind in the Gulf region. This latter fact is significant: South Asian nationals account for nearly 60% of the entire population of the UAE. Yet, for a long time, they didn't make the cut as protagonists in the tableaux that plays out here; they were more the stagehands. As part of a greater, nebulous shift in thinking, things seem to be changing in the art world (beyond the auction of 'British Raj' jewels, rugs and paintings): commercial and institutional platforms are increasingly engaging with South Asia in a more meaningful manner.

But Ishara isn't trying to clarify any clichés, globalise relationships or provide insights into the politics of migration. In fact, it is refreshingly unapologetic in its refusal to do so. What it has done – lyrically with its first show and more purposefully with its second – is to attempt to observe the brown body pitched into a vortex of rapid change and flung across land, sometimes within its homeland and often across seas into cities like Dubai.

Many of the images in 'Body Building', especially in the works of Vasantha Yoganathan, Abdul Halik

Azeez, Arthur Crestani and Pablo Bartholomew, feature bodies in lower-class conditions and nondescript sites that largely elude location markers. Similarly, Zahra Malkani and Shahana Rajani's video *Jinnah Avenue*, part of their 'Exhausted Geographies' project, ominously narrates the frenzy of continuous development that is familiar to many ambitious economies and singular to none. These images could be from anywhere, and at first seem to be set in and around Dubai. Closer inspection reveals that they are set in cities across India, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. The works raise the question of whether it matters where they are taken if the images speak of similar fractures.

Nada Raza, the artistic director of the foundation and the curator of the exhibition, describes the show as producing a certain 'placelessness'. The disjuncture between land, body and architecture that the exhibition surveys mirrors the cause and symptom of an overwhelming sense of chaos - one that is suspended between aspirational and undesirable. The photographs, videos and publications in the exhibition endeavour to anthropomorphise statistics, maps and history. Perhaps the artists imagined that this was the only way to humanise otherwise untold stories.

In *From Gulf to Gulf to Gulf*, a film by CAMP, footage of a group of sailors is overlaid with popular Indian songs, creating a narrative of love, yearning and loss. The film features seamen from India, Pakistan and Iran traversing the waters of the Persian and Aden gulfs, looking shyly into the camera to sing, dance, feed cattle, clean muck, exchange notes and continue business as usual, all the while giving us a rare insight into a world that we may never otherwise have access to. While friendship and camaraderie seemingly bind this nation of seafarers, there are deep undercurrents, from my perspective as an economically stable and landlocked outsider, of unfulfilled desires and futures.

Despite the fact that consent to be pictured is obvious in most of the works, an uneasy sense of cavalier imposition lingers for me, and also a sense of moral culpability that is hard to put a finger on. Perhaps it is the insoluble burden of the diaspora. It is easier to identify a moral position in Rajyashri Goody's documentation of the harrowing circumstances surrounding the Dalit (untouchable) caste in India, channelled autobiographically through family photographs, buoyed skilfully by poetic food recipes that can never truly be executed. During an artist-led food tour of the Satwa neighbourhood, as Goody recited her piece *Thootan*, it became essential to admit - as a Pakistani - that variants of these problems existed across divisions of statehood and religion.

The exhibition ends with a loop of two black-and-white shorts by Indian filmmaker Pramod Pati which Raza cites as the conceptual starting point for the exhibition. Devoid of dialogue but packed with symbolism and commentary, they were originally part of a portfolio of skits meant to instil civic sense into

the modern Indian. Seen in retrospect, they sketch an accurate but disconcerting caricature of cities that would soon be bursting at the seams. Just as *Six, Five, four, Three, Two*, 1968, pantomimes the family-planning process of a happy, nuclear unit in a bleak cement high-rise building, *Trip/Udan*, 1970, highlights the progress and development of a large metropolis crawling with dwellers endlessly moving, parking, crossing and crowding it.



Arthur Crestani, *AVJ PLATINUM #3*  
*Enhancing Lifestyles...*, 2017

Juxtaposition, it seems, is the only way to make sense of the madness that inhabits a region as large, diverse and fraught as South Asia. It also provides a contrast to Ishara's first exhibition, 'Altered Inheritances: Home is a Foreign Place', which examined belonging from a position of privilege and agency that is deliberately missing from 'Body Building'. In a final act of antithesis, this exhibition is hung heavily, with over 90 works spread on two floors, yet it doesn't feel cluttered. There is too much to unpack but the noise (both literal and figurative) comes together in an organised cacophony which talks of everything, and all at once. Much in the way conversation takes place back at home.

**Saira Ansari** is a researcher and writer based in Dubai.

work by Phil Coy in the context of Heathrow, M25, M4, and M40

04.10.19 >>> 16.12.19

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text by Will Self