

HYPERALLERGIC

Gloriously Defiant Expressions of Cultures Perceived as Threatening to the West

At Southern Exposure in San Francisco, South Asian, Southwest Asian, and North African artists evoke the challenges they face in celebrating their cultural origins.

by Roula Seikaly
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Umber Majeed, "In the Name of Hypersurface of the Present", video still (image courtesy the artist and Southern Exposure)

SAN FRANCISCO — "This is for us. This is us expressing a full, culturally dynamic self."

Those were part of the introductory remarks made by Zulfikar Bhutto, artist and co-curator of *Where Do You Want Ghosts to Reside?*, now on view at Southern Exposure through March 14. Bhutto voiced a sentiment shared by fellow curator Azin Seraj, the featured artists, and anyone who grew up outside the United States or Western Europe: cultural assimilation is mandatory. But what happens when that mandate is refused?

SO U T H E R N E X P O S U R E

The exhibition registers as a dialogue between six artists who strive to understand how religion, history, technology, mysticism, and myth shape them and the cultures (South Asian, Southwest Asian, and North African, respectively) they represent within a diasporan context. Audiences are invited to witness the artists' quest for knowledge. In doing so, we begin to appreciate the difficulty they face in celebrating their cultural origins when doing so is perceived as threatening by so many in the West.



We are deluged almost daily with headlines about the horrors the United States threatens to unleash against adversaries in Iran and North Korea if they produce nuclear armaments. Pakistani artist Umber Majeed addresses this dire existential issue from a more intimate vantage point. Marshaling both family and state archival material, Majeed's two-part installation — "Cone of Light" and "In the Name of Hypersurface of the Present" (both 2018) — deploys speculative fiction and digital kitsch to examine Pakistan's status as the first Muslim nuclear state. On the world stage, Pakistan's nuclear program is a point of militaristic and cultural pride that is thought to be divinely ordained. From a lived perspective, it activates a profound sense of dread, knowing that even a hint of nuclear engagement invites catastrophe.

"PTV" (2019), Anum Awan's curated selection of news, sports, drama, and music videos, also draws on archival material, and is so relatable as to be mundane. The range of clips culled from the network's archive signal the breadth of programming offered on the 55-year-old service. Pakistan Television Corporation (PTV) has served military and political information agendas over the years and, as private networks and the internet forever altered what content viewers see,

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has become dated. “PTV” presents a tantalizing view of how Pakistani content creators have worked within politically and religiously prescribed parameters, sampling the stream of Western cultural and commercial content but not swallowing and regurgitating it wholecloth.



The sound of dripping water accompanies Arshia Fatima Haq’s “The Ascension” (2018). A collaborative project produced with LA-based artist Cassils, Haq is seen gilding an ice sculpture of the Buraq, the mythical creature — part woman, part horse — described in the Qur’an as transporting the Prophet Muhammed between terrestrial and heavenly planes. Haq’s use of gold leaf and dust evokes the long history of Islamic artistic accomplishment across multiple media, but illuminated manuscripts particularly, and the skill required to work the valuable material resource. Here, Haq adorns an object that melts before our eyes. “The Ascension” gently reminds us that no matter how divergent our religious or spiritual beliefs, our mortal endeavors carry a temporal limitation. Whatever those endeavors are, the hard work we do is worthwhile, even if it dissolves like rivulets of gold-streaked water that pools at our feet.



In a darkened alcove, three video selections from Morehshin Allahyari’s “She Who Sees the Unknown” series (2016-2019) likewise take up Islamic mysticism. Allahyari addresses contemporary concerns — colonialism and its lingering traumas, patriarchy, and environmental degradation — through spirits known as jinn. “Huma” (2016) adapts the tale of a demon to whom fever is attributed as a metaphor for global warming and the often Western-centric nature of discussions about the disaster now unfolding. In “Aisha Qandisha” (2016), Allahyari describes the attributes of a fearsome female jinn who forcibly exposes the entity she possesses to outside forces. If the host does not submit to her demands for complete openness, madness sets in. Allahyari poses a potent, all-too-relatable metaphor for love and the existential pain we experience when it dies.

Where Do You Want Ghosts to Reside? opened immediately on the heels of the Trump administration’s “targeted killing” of General Qasem Soleimani and threats (eventually retracted) to bomb Iranian cultural sites (a war crime) if the Islamic Republic retaliates. On February 6, Southern Exposure announced that participating Canadian-Iranian artist Shirin Fahimi was denied entrance to the United States for unknown reasons, thus impacting the one-night performance “Breaching Towards Other Futures” at CounterPulse in San Francisco. If nothing else, these events evidence the rot of Islamophobia in this country and how far the Trump administration will go in service of a “protectionist” white nationalist agenda. Knowing this, Bhutto’s opening remarks are all the more comforting.

S—O U T H E R N E—X P O S U R E

Where Do You Want Ghosts to Reside? invites us to acknowledge gaps in our knowledge, and recognize the intense pressure people of color often feel to subsume one's origins in service of conformity and relative safety. By that measure, and in the face of virulent racism, this intimate exhibition constitutes a glorious act of defiance.

Where Do You Want Ghosts to Reside? continues at Southern Exposure (3030 20th St, San Francisco) through March 14. The exhibition was curated by Zulfikar Bhutto and Azin Seraj.