

# Women's Lives as Contested Sites

Derrick Adams, Arshiya Lokhandwala, and Uzma Z. Rizvi describe how artists in a show they recently curated in New York, addressed issues of marginalisation and violent displacement.

WE LIVE IN INCREASINGLY VIOLENT TIMES. THE CITY, AS A BODY, is marked, pierced, and reshaped, to conform to notions of capitalistic development, and altered cartographies play out a conservative agenda that expresses itself on women's lives, bodies, and experiences. Post 9/11, there has been a resurgence of religious fundamentalism, shaped among other reasons, by mass movements of individuals through war, exile, and migration. Art looks at the city as a locale of both pain and healing. For artists of South Asian descent in the first world, the urban space has become a site of contestation as they attempt to make sense of the violence, the negative stereotyping, the racial profiling, and the continued marginalization they experience.

The early twentieth century avant-garde movement, Dada, emerged as a passionate but playful protest against the incomprehensible destruction of bodies and cities during World War I. Global cities have since transformed from being key exporters of art, culture, and commodity into sites and sources of fear, violence, and the "War on Terror". These increasingly paranoid urban spaces harbour fears of

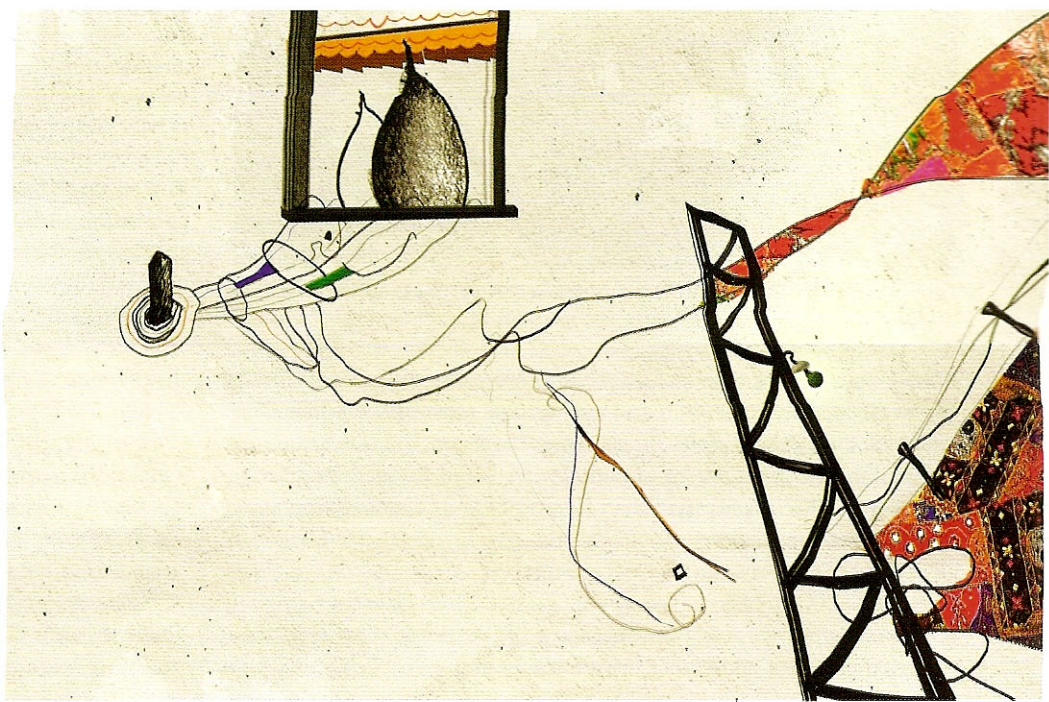
irrational violence equated with terrorism, inducing a "society of control" in which surveillance, intimidation, and the erosion of personal liberty, force forms of artistic resistance that employ strategies drawn from Absurdist traditions.

The exhibition, *In a State of Emergency? Women, War, and the Politics of Urban Survival*, presented by the Alwan for the Arts, New York, from the 30th of November to the 9th of December, drew on Walter Benjamin's complication of the concept of "the state of emergency," traditionally understood as a period of exceptional executive power through which the state maintains control in moments of crisis. For Benjamin, however, the "real state of emergency" emerges in the forms of protest through which the oppressed resist. He says, "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception, but the rule."

Like the Dadaists, the practitioners in the show responded to the presence of war, violence, and other excesses of contemporary urban

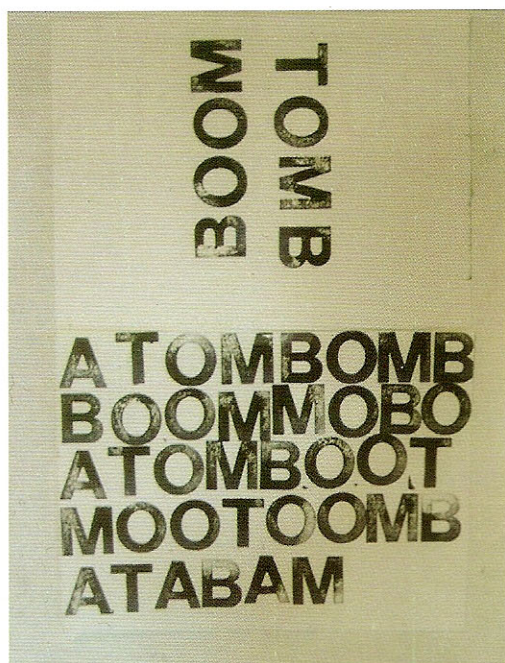


Salma Arastu. *New York and I*. Photograph. 2006



Meherunissa Asad. *Saffron Thread*. Still from animated film. 2004 – 2006.





Kiran Chandra. *Boom*. Text Drawings.



Carol Pereira. *Cool Down*. Video still. 2004.

life. Like the Dadaist women artists, they engaged with issues of identity impacted by male repression and subjugation. Most of the artists were aware of how urban social orders were based on the governance of space, and how each system of control was based on meta-structuring agents. Such disciplinary systems of control exuded masculinity, often necessitating the physical, emotional, and psychological domination of women, placing them in a "state of emergency."

Recognizing resistance as necessary, the artists in this exhibition mounted critiques, addressing private issues in public. Maryum Saifee's

*South Asian Postcards from the Middle East: From Sri Lankan Maid to Bollywood Film Queen* (2000-2002), comprised a series of self-portraits framed within urbanscapes, produced over the two years she spent with the US Peace Corps in Lebanon and Jordan. In these jewel-like postcards, Saifee addressed racial and national stereotypes created and circulated through the mass media by reflecting on her own experiences as a South Asian woman in the Middle East. Often mistaken for a Sri Lankan maid or a Bollywood heroine, Saifee reclaimed certain stereotypes by revisiting them. The alluring heroine (the object of sexual desire) and the abused domestic worker (the invisible subject of transnational labor) were both rendered visible through the artist's performative body.

Grappling with a different experience of mass invisibility was Salma Arastu's *New York and I* (2005) series. Familiar New York cityscapes crowded with unknown faces epitomized the struggle of city life. Individuals lose their identities in huge collectivities, which simultaneously isolate and connect people. The people in these photographs hovered between visibility and invisibility, a liminal state familiar to many first- and second-generation immigrants who struggle with the ambiguity inherent in cultural assimilation as required by Western democracies.

Meherunnisa Asad's animated film, *Saffron Thread*, (2004-2006), took you on a surreal, nostalgic, carefree, rickety auto-rickshaw ride through Lahore. In stark comparison to Arastu's congested sidewalks, people seemed to be missing from Old Lahore's narrow streets and bazaars in Asad's film. With each sudden turn, Asad jerked us into witnessing something we usually miss, the beauty in the chaos of everyday urbanscapes, the vivid colours, sights, and smells that texture city life. Fantasy prevailed as one was taken between the minarets of the city mosque, dodging hanging laundry and electricity lines, revelling in the sheer joy of absolute freedom of movement.

Inverting the structure of fantasy and exploring the absurd was Carol Pereira's orchestrated performance video, *Cool Down* (2004). A military troupe consisting of young college students from Bangalore enlisted by the artist participated in a comical parody of war in an amusement park. The camouflaged soldiers marched to an absurd litany of military commands, finally ending up wet in a swimming pool. A participant sported a "Warning: Highly Volatile" sign on his back, a wry acknowledgment of the fine line between civilian life and aggressive, combative life in uniform. A radical shift occurred once war drums were sounded – the absurd became sombre, the imagined and the real overlapped – signifying that the war/game had only just begun.

Defying the tried-and-tested rules of engagement, these artists employed guerrilla tactics to redefine violence as they discovered and occupied vulnerable spaces within the urban fabric. In *Jihad Pop* (2006), a series of digital prints and drawings, Seher Shah evoked the annihilating nature of war – she explored the paranoia of conspiracy theories, the uncomfortable feeling of being mapped and plotted within the matrix of a larger global plan, by using a grid-like arrangement in her works. A sacred geometry, alluded to by Islamic motifs drawn from





**Bindu Mehra.** *AK47*. Hot glue, fabric and acrylic. 12" x 42". 2004.

calligraphy, mosques, veils, and other patterns, was juxtaposed with images of women's bodies. These bodies were not passive but over-active (fighting a jihad) – they were protesting against the violence against them. While the delicate, floral drawings reminded us of the vulnerability of women's bodies during war-time, they also formed constellation-like patterns, graphic feminine havens in these contested maps and landscapes.

Such political interventions engaging in a re-imagining of spaces and texts reappeared in the clever manipulation of words/meanings in Kiran Chandra's 'text drawings'. The humorous word play in the works referenced political propaganda and conceptual art, drawing our attention to the way in which language controlled and affected our thinking. In undertaking these investigative 'shifts' through the written word, the artist used the structural tools of language, punctuation, and grammar, to arrive at alternative meanings. *B (LACK)* (2006) alluded to the absence or lack (of virtue/intelligence) encoded in racial stereotypes; *THIS PLACE...* (2006) proclaimed rootedness and acknowledged the homelessness resulting from conflict and immigration; *IT'S A S (MALL)WORLD* (2006) communicated the true nature of our over-commodified lives after globalization.

Refocusing our attention on the widening spaces of capitalistic gain as reflected in unbridled urban development, Vandana Sood's video, *Evaporations* (2004), meditated on the meaning of life through a documentary portrait of Gurgaon, Noida, and New Delhi. The changing cityscape, dotted with luxury skyscrapers, flyovers, and mega malls revealed a growing class disparity. Referring to water as a precious form of energy, Sood warned us about taking the situation seriously – otherwise, real progress would 'evaporate' soon, she seemed to claim.

The desire to control, purchase, and possess commodities was challenged by two artists in the show. Bindu Mehra's sculptures, created with hot glue and a variety of decorative fabrics/objects, alluded to both the violence of war and the preciousness of life. Objects of war were rendered in materials that appeared both beautiful and fragile. In *AK47* (2004), a transparent replica of the rifle was riddled with red spots, evoking both flowers and the splatter of blood. Traditional, mirror-



**Mona Kamal.** *Pine Needle Sari*. Sari, Pine needles. 2002.

encrusted cloth was used to make *Handcuff* (2004), transforming the item curbing a prisoner's freedom into bejewelled bangles. Similarly, in *Crutches* (2004), lace glamorized an object emblemizing pain and loss. In these works, beauty conquered violence and the sinister was made home!

In *Pine-Needle Sari* (2002), Mona Kamal, a Canadian/Indian artist used the sari as a metaphor for her body/identity, caught between two traditions, lives, and cultures. Pine needles from Canada were woven into six feet of Indian fabric through a labour of love – a process by which Kamal integrated both cultures into one fabric. The *Pine-Needle Sari* which resembled skin lined with prickly hair, made us aware of the feminine body beneath, alive and breathing, bearing the weight of the needles of patriarchy and society.

Not surprisingly, such critical interventions adopted by the artist were in line with the aims and ideologies of the sponsor of this show – the South Asian Women's Creative Collective.

#### ABOUT THE WRITERS/CURATORS:

Artist **Derrick Adams** is the founding Director and Curator of the Rush Arts Gallery and Resource Center in Chelsea. He has taught at Columbia University, Maryland Institute College of Art, and the University of Tennessee/Knoxville. His own work has been exhibited at the Brooklyn Museum, the Studio Museum in Harlem, and the PS1/MoMA. **Arshiya Lokhandwala** was the founder/curator of Lakeeren Art Gallery, Mumbai. She curated *Rites/Rights/ Rewrites: Women's Video Art*, which travelled to Cornell, Duke and Rutgers Universities from 2003 to 2006, among other places. She is currently a PhD candidate at the History of Art Department, Cornell University.

**Uzma Z. Rizvi** is an anthropologist and has been an active cultural producer based in Brooklyn, New York, over the past five years. Her work includes theatre, documentary and radio. She is completing her PhD in Anthropology, specializing in Archaeology, from the Department of Anthropology, University of Pennsylvania, and currently teaches at the Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York.