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Mona Kamal: Tracing Journeys

Posted by Priyanka S



Mona Kamal, Reflections on Memory (2011)

A visual artist, whose origins are rooted in the Indian subcontinent, raised in Canada and currently residing in New York, Mona Kamal engages with photography, video, and installation to create contemporary multi-media narratives about migration, journeys, and identities. As she mentions, she creates fictitious exotic spaces that spark a feeling of nostalgia that tell a story of a lost culture due to immigration. These spaces function as both means to conduct dialogue as well as functioning as dialogues about leaving and recreating home.

What inspires you to create: a thought, image, concept or -ism?

The most basic way of answering this question is that my life inspires me to create. I get my ideas for my artworks from what surrounds me. A lot of it is from reading (literature, non-fiction and newspapers) and the Western perspective of my culture and religion. I feel that I often get ideas for my work based on responses/judgments that I receive in America about identifying myself as a Muslim Pakistani woman. My parents' history additionally also has been a great inspiration as they, like most Muslims, were greatly affected by the partition of India in 1947 as not only was their country divided...but their family was also split between two countries.

My inspiration most recently comes from the rise of Islamism in South Asia and particularly Pakistan. I feel my art is a voice of resistance against religious fundamentalism and western stereotypes of Islam and South Asian culture and therefore, a manner in which I can preserve a specific history and culture.

ABOUT



The [International Museum of Women](#) is an innovative, online social change museum that amplifies the voices of women worldwide through global online exhibitions, history, the arts and cultural programs.

The I.M.O.W. blog is updated by the Museum team multiple times a week, with a focus on women's arts, culture and current events through a global lens.

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You have worked in a variety of media such as installation art and video projects. What compels and attracts you towards each? Do the subject and content of your work influence your decision as to which particular medium you will use?

I remember when I was doing my BFA at NSCAD in Halifax, Nova Scotia, a graduate student told me that once you are confident in your practice and the concepts behind your work, you will feel comfortable about working in different media. I always felt that was a very strong statement: I do feel that an artist should work in different mediums depending on the meaning they are attempting to convey.

Both my video projects and installations are process based so that definitely has compelled me towards both mediums. I find video a unique medium because it captures movement whereas within my installations I am creating a space for the viewer to move about in.

Furthermore, my videos have a performative aspect and many times I am in the videos whereas my installations allow me to play with materials and construct structures. I am telling a story within both, creating spaces that are both physical as well as allowing for a dialogue about identity and migration.



Hot Mess Series, 2012 from mona kamal on Vimeo.

The 'Hot Mess' video series interrogates the expectations placed upon women of a certain color and not choosing to conform to societal expectations. Does gender play a crucial role in determining the trajectories of your artistic and personal lives?

Gender and race are both very significant components of my personal and artistic life (I don't think my artistic and personal lives are separate).

I have mostly recently gained an interest in feminist writing written by women of colour; these readings have demonstrated the challenges that the 70s feminist movement faced due to their difficulties in perceiving the perspectives of women from the developing world and even visible women minorities in the West.

You mention that your work deals with the complexity of your migratory history. How has that shaped you as an individual? Does it continuously inform your work?

As I previously mentioned, my family's and my own migrations are a strong influence in my work, way of thinking and my notion of home, culture and identity; I feel that culture, language and traditions transcend borders and that we strongly relate and put ourselves in contexts to our own and family's histories.

The notion of migration is a continuous theme in my work; I currently find that I am defending myself living in the United States and the misconceived Western notion that Pakistan is part of the Middle East and has Arab roots. I feel that I am attempting to remind American society that Pakistan was once part of India and we are culturally similar to North India. I find in the United States when I say this the answer is, "How can you say this when they are enemies?" I find this point of view very black and white; I suppose I am attempting to add some grey to the western way of thinking. I can only conclude that having a history of multi-generational migrations only adds grey to one's concept of home, culture and identity.

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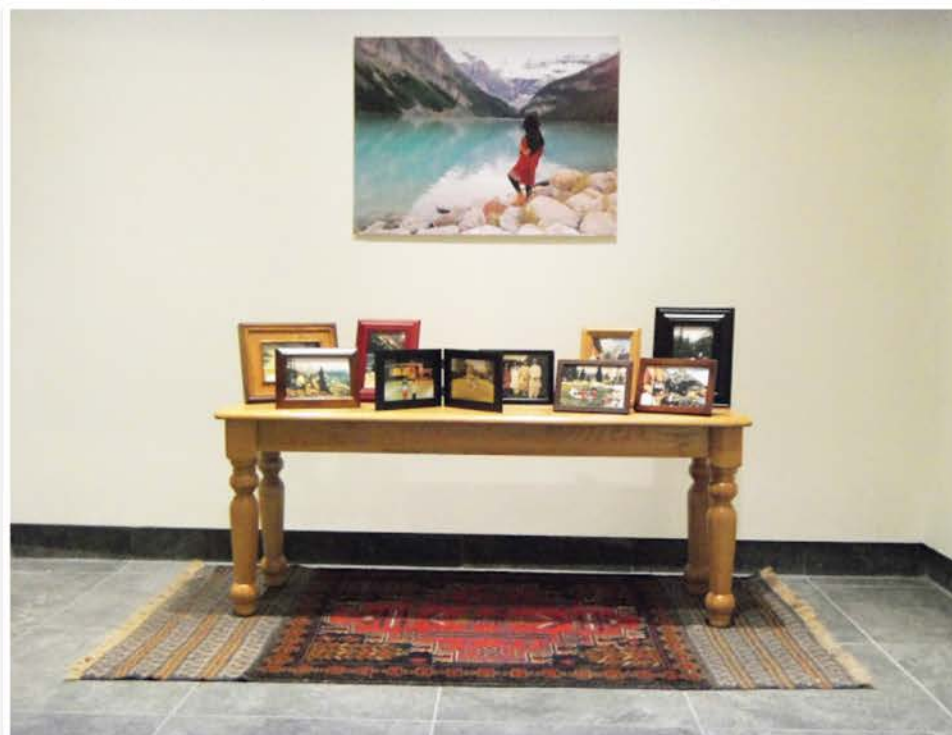
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Fallen Wall, 2010

The installation, 'Fallen Wall' uses your great-grandfather's letters and found bricks. What made you choose to intertwine these two disparate elements together to create your narrative about loss of identity?

"Fallen Wall" is about migration and in particular, Partition. My great-grandfather wrote these letters to his son living in Pakistan during the 1950s; he had remained in India post-Partition. The bricks strongly embody this notion of loss: loss of a home. Furthermore, the fact that I just happened to find these bricks symbolises me attempting to locate and define this loss. I also feel that the notion of a lost home and culture also emerges from this work as the letters are written in Urdu, a language that I cannot read. I think that these two disparate elements being put together represents a loss that will not be found or "put back together."



Reflection on Memory, 2011

Vintage photographs frequently dominate and form the axis of your work. How do you perceive these photographs? What do you seek to achieve through their re-presentation and insertion into the fabric of your particular narratives?

I have used both family photographs that my father took when I was a child growing up in Calgary, Canada and also photographs of my family prior to my birth taken in British India and contemporary Pakistan and India. I see it as a means of documenting a time past as well as helping in telling my story.

The photographs that my father took document my childhood. Many times these photos look confusing to viewers in the West as they attempt to make sense of a South-Asian family in the mountainous landscapes, often wearing traditional Indian and Pakistani garments. A Western viewer attempts to exoticise these photos, perceiving them to belong to a faraway land. Whereas when the images are shown to people of my culture, they see them as family childhood photos that are a means to preserve memories of family trips. This documentation also tells a story of an immigrant family – how we were and are perceived in the West and how we held on to our culture, language and traditions while attempting to live and conform to a Western culture.

You have also played around with a variety of materials: fabric, rice-paper, sand, and rose-petals in your work. What role does texture and tangibility play in your works?

The first thing that comes to my mind is that I am South Asian and texture is part of my everyday life. I live here in United States, which I feel lacks texture and tangibility. I attempt to keep alive the vibrant smells, colours and textures from Pakistan and India while living in North America through the materials I choose in my artwork.

To see and learn more about Mona's art, please visit her [website](#).

at Tuesday, March 12, 2013 TAGS: bell hooks, feminist movement, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, India, migration, muslim women, pakistan, South Asia, Vijay Agnew, visual art



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