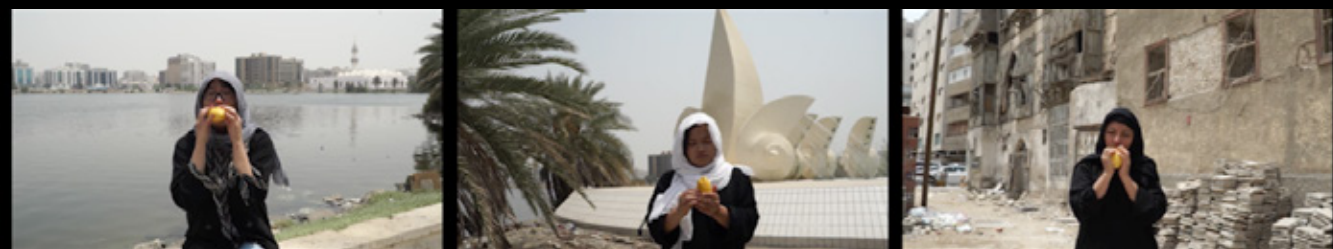


Percussive Ritual in
Asma Kazmi's *City of Migrants*
Leila Weefur



Asma Kazmi, *City of Migrants: Indian Mangoes by the Red Sea* [video still], 2017. Courtesy of the artist.

Are all pilgrims exhausted? A question gracefully posed by Bay Area artist **Asma Kazmi** in *City of Migrants: Eating Indian Mangoes by the Red Sea*. The title immediately activates a multisensory response from the body. It is as colorful and dense as the fruit in mention. The three-channel video offers a moment of devotional interaction between two bodies: human and fruit. **Kazmi's** work, predominantly time-based media and VR, is concerned with interaction and collision. She situates her subjects to negotiate their proximities to one another, highlighting the subtleties that rest in the interstices of interaction, in moments when both time and silence are personified.

City of Migrants is a video triptych with figure, landscape, and score positioning three bodies, each holding and eating a mango in the center of an unspecified location in Jeddah, a port city of Saudi Arabia at the confluence of the Red Sea. The viewer is invited to watch the simultaneous consumption of mangoes. The only dialogue is the quiet gesture passed between fruit, human, and the spectator. The gesture unfolds in symbiosis

between the bodies watching and those in the video being watched, implicating the viewer in the consumption. The piece offers a direct vantage into three simultaneous performances of a ritual: eating. The parallel between the act of eating and the practice of prayer is discernible through each of the three women's individual communion with the fruit.

The most curious transformations, those that occur in the mundane, happen in silence, the transformations we don't seek but are the natural result of an act or gesture like breathing, bathing, and walking home after work. These transformations are the result of rituals practiced not in service to a specific set of religious beliefs but in a pilgrimage to the self. Unlike the women, mangoes are expected to immediately change physical form, as they endure peeling and sucking, being uncovered, and for the human body to change internally from the transaction of nutrition.

Watching these women eat, one can become so enamored by the pace and rhythm of their eating that it is possible to nearly forget to listen. There is a score, however quite unassuming. The sounds come directly from the landscape, which, due to its ubiquity, can be a point of sonic neglect. After a viewing one may notice the patterns of collision that show up throughout. Water and wind have a way of meeting surfaces with a percussive intention: the water spouting from a fountain making contact with its cemented sculptural base, the water from the sea crashing against the rocks on shore, and the wind finding friction with any solid structure impeding its travel is cacophonous.

Through the simple act of eating mango, interwoven with the text, the piece introduces a conflation of the past and present of the city of Mecca. **Kazmi** writes, “The ancient cosmopolitan Makkah was made up of pilgrims choosing to stay behind in the city of their beloved prophet. They brought their traditions, built a culture of co-existence and planted their mango trees here.” We learn that mangoes are not indigenous to Mecca,

a city that receives over fifteen million pilgrims every year for Hajj, during Ramadan, and for Umrah. What do these pilgrims leave behind? How does their visit register on the earth that the holy black cube is built on, and what do they leave behind?

The Red Sea, like other bodies of water, is a passage and a connector of distant lands, politics, and racial histories. In a way, the women and the mangoes represent the presence of boundaries, both being impeded by choice and by nature. Indian mangoes have a history of banned import to other continents like Europe. These so-called preservative measures to their respective ecological systems had an impeditive impact on the mango's journey and potential transformation; a change of environment could alter its size, color, and taste.

Kazmi's work often unsettles the boundaries between objects and bodies. In her 2014 video installation, *Ordinary People*, three politicians are asked to sit in their private homes in Karachi,

Pakistan and stare directly into the camera. The absence of dialogue, similar to *City of Migrants*, gives heightened visibility to their humanity by amplifying their facial expressions. The scenario **Kazmi** confronts the viewer with is usually a state of uncomfortable interaction that exists in perpetuity.

In Kazmi's work, collision is made to be a casual motif. I think about the way language collides with itself as it struggles to find form around identifying bodies, causing everyone who participates in it to collide with each other. **Kazmi** poignantly illustrates the arrival to Jeddah and how the American traveler's penchant to consume collides with the prayer rugs and modesty of the "less-endowed," as she puts it. These collisions result in exhaustion, but exhaustion is not exclusively depleting, as **Kazmi's** work gives way to other possibilities, conjuring histories and bodies the temporality of the pilgrimage city violently erases.

Deep-Time Construction is on view at CCA Wattis Institute, San Francisco, from May 31–July 28, 2018. This exhibition is curated by *contemporary*.

Leila Weefur lives and works in Oakland, CA. Weefur received her MFA from Mills College in 2016.

With a multidisciplinary practice, Weefur tackles the complexities of phenomenological Blackness through video, installation, printmaking, and lecture-performances. Using materials and visual gestures to access the tactile memory, she explores the abject, the sensual and the nuance found in the social interactions and language with which our bodies have to negotiate space. She is a recipient of the Hung Liu award, the Murphy & Cadogan award, and recently completed an artist fellowship at Kala Art Institute. Weefur has exhibited her work in local and national galleries including Southern Exposure and SOMArts Gallery in San Francisco, Betti Ono in Oakland, BAMPFA, and Smack Mellon in Brooklyn, New York.

She is the Audio/Video Editor In Chief at *Art Practical* and the co-director of *The Black Aesthetic*.