

The space between

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Eleven perspectives on truth, storytelling and artistry come together for CONTACT, a prescient display of works representative of shared experience and understanding. This group exhibition, curated by artist and poet Elyas Alavi, befits a moment in time when mass disruption, conflict and loss has marred not only the last 12 months but more fittingly, the 21st century. As historical evidence of social, environmental and political unrest collides with our current pressures and uncertain future we are now collectively awakening to the challenges that precede us. This exhibition aims to connect stories with bodies and landscapes communicating both hardship and sanguinity.

Author, Achille Mbembe wrote of a 'world outside relation' where boundaries, walls and enclosures could erase shared humanities and commonalities. What we are witnessing today is a generation shifting and refocusing its priorities, observing the effects of social and cultural change and attempting a cooperative effort to upheaval. As we observe and live with border restrictions, we must question how one positions themselves within space—public, private, colonized—and what action can be taken when such significant meaning and potential is being felt.

It is with this sentimentality that the artworks in CONTACT occupy a number of concerns which transcend the spaces of the gallery walls traversing borders and boundaries from our own locale to those unknown. Other countries, continents and capitals have become distant entities; we are now 'limited' to the fringes of the familiar. However, it has been the work of the confined artist that can transport and translate these seemingly faraway places into something more common and interconnected.

Raqs Media Collective lament 'If the world were to lose its center, what would happen to its margins?' As we face a daunting and somewhat unknown future it is in these spaces—the margins—that perhaps truth and optimism now exist. In which direction should we go once these divisions are established and assumed?

Photographers Aziz Azizyar and Abbas Asi both utilise the body and landscape as a communicative tool for the impermanent and permanent nature of site and identity. For Azizyar the duality between the mundane and familiar when juxtaposed with the stark reality of a war-torn country is a palpable and profound moment of transcendence. In contrast to this, Abbas Asi's photography is more ominous and open-ended asking the viewer to confront not only the violence (imposed by crime or climate) but the actuality of being visible and accountable in a society that elects to eliminate and disguise its crimes. These are starkly different approaches yet fittingly communicate the power of photography in story-telling. What both Azizyar and Asi communicate beyond the image is how the individual sits within a community or regime with control.

Zubaida Husaini's photography also looks at groups and the day-to-day life of Afghan refugees, Baloch ethnics and Sunni faith communities in their homes, shops and places of worship. The photographs are taken with mobile phone technology in Golshahr, Iran, the artist's hometown. These domesticated views resonate as instant and

familiar. Although a multiplicity of differences exists between this land and Zubaida's these photographs communicate not only a vast starkness but many universal values that are shared by all.

Orna Kazimi's *Death starts from the right toe* acts as both a contemporary artwork and historical reading of generational trauma through migrant story-telling. This assemblage (both temporary and ephemeral in its approach) seeks to chart a lifetime of experiences yet focusses on what is 'missing from memory'. Through critical writing, sculpture, film and drawing Kazimi attempts to bridge the commonalities of trauma. Utilising repetitive emblems, jarring colours and layered imagery what we witness is a physical manifestation of unseen suffering and its retelling in various forms.

What appears beyond the edges of each artist's work is a collective act to revisit and retell personal or collective trauma—not to be misconstrued as a cathartic response to memory or place, but to be read as a unified declaration that we cannot remain complicit or continue to witness these atrocities at any distance.

Beverley Onyangunga uses her research-based practice to expose, question and engage with histories connected to capitalism and conflict minerals. Her work, utilising researched photographs and collage is a menagerie of unsettling tales—personal grief for capital gain, colonized bodies, unknown identities—speaking directly to a history that has harmed so many whilst looking outwardly at future industries that still profit from slavery.

Extending this inward look at capitalism, propaganda and those who suffer at the hands of profiteering, Makeda Duong examines her own familial connections to capitalist systems and western ideals of 'success'. By juxtaposing contemporary motivational sales quotes with leftist political emblems, this jarring combination of text and insignias questions the vulnerability of second-generation immigrants who exist and identify with multiple sides of our political and cultural history. Makeda's 'craft' illuminates an important aspect of self-representation and its disconnection with place when relation is lost between multiple lands.

On a small yet detailed scale Sunyoul Kim inflates and confounds viewers with his satirist work based on imperialist theory and its influence on society. As a Korean artist working with colonial experience Sunyoul has absorbed and attempts to reflect upon and reimagine the paradigms of economic power and persuasion on developing countries. Self-identification becomes a surreal archetype blurred between the extremes of technological advancement and its effect on nationalism, equality and social harmony.

Retelling stories of migration through abstraction is a striking counterpart to compliment the other conceptual works in CONTACT. Abraham Mohammadi and Abdullah Alavi Jafari both utilise fierce, vibrant brushstrokes with intriguing palletes to communicate the harsh terrain of travelling migrants particularly when faced with imminent danger. In Abraham Mohammadi's paintings he combines the theories of western art whilst focusing on the contemporisation of Mughal painting. He focusses on the Hazara community in Afghanistan and Pakistan—one of the largest communities of migrants forced to resettle due to conflict. By using symbolism and the abstraction of birds and Persian text Abraham echoes the challenges and fears of this community who have been forced to seek refuge in unfamiliar land. The

multiplication and patterning of these symbols create uncertainty and confusion on close inspection—an apt and fitting response to such challenging subject matter.

For Abdullah Alavi Jafari painting his experience of ‘seeking refuge’, a journey which took him from Iran to Sweden and then to Afghanistan, highlighted the similarities and differences between other individuals he met along the way. Whilst many were lost, through violent or unfortunate circumstances, Abdullah considered each person of equal worth; each suffering a foul journey with unknown outcomes. Abdullah paints a bleak and sorrowful series of self-portraits that include sub-conscious memories of great pain and struggle. These paintings not only blur the picture plane of any real portrait but further obliterate any spatial awareness—there is no center, there is no home.

A film work by Nigerian choreographers, the Ebinum Brothers, utilises movement and site to display both sprawling landscapes and choreography as a form of storytelling. Inspired by the Black Lives Matters movement the duo performs before a stark desert-like field expressing both division and connection between bodies and histories. Subtle and rhythmic movement reenacting unwarranted arrests and oppressive conduct communicates both alienation and newfound interconnectedness all drawn together by the BLM movement.

Expanding into conceptual, ritualistic and digital practices, Jonathan Kim offers viewers insight into two simultaneous gallery spaces divided by not only oceans but by institutions and digital/streaming platforms that aid and somewhat control artistic perception. Exploring the notion of substitution, replication and representation within the Covid-19 pandemic Jonathan’s work is a real-time encounter where viewers become one with the work, whilst being witnessed by another. By encouraging digital spaces to host and house artistic encounters Kim’s work introduces new pathways towards inclusion and interactivity between objects and viewers.

CONTACT is both troubling and hopeful in its curatorial approach. I recently read newly elected US President Jo Biden has proposed various reforms to the immigration bill removing the term ‘alien’ with ‘noncitizen’ as a symbolic action to restore (not singlehandedly) generations of dehumanising treatment of immigrants. This small act is one of many efforts from varying levels of power that utilises language to change preconceived notions of the migrant experience. Migrant language has been used to racialize, discriminate and debase people of a certain colour or location for generations. As more of the western world is living with lockdowns, travel bans, border restrictions and interactions with policing we are moving closer to recognising our shifting roles as citizens of the world. I am reminded of the words of recently released Medevac refugee Mostafa Azimitabar who was housed in hotel quarantine for over a year in addition to his time as a detainee on Manus Island. He said to media “I’ve never even dreamed of being free.” The migrant experience is a richly powerful and complex archetype of light and shade. Exhibitions like CONTACT illuminate that sharing experiences and encouraging understanding can help bring these imposed margins closer to the center.

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