



Can

you hear

my

voice?

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VCA
Victorian College
of the Arts

Margaret Lawrence Gallery
Victorian College of the Arts
Faculty of Fine Arts and Music
University of Melbourne

Designed by Jack Loel
Printed in Melbourne
Edition of 100
ISBN 978-0-6485586-5-1

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Margaret Lawrence Gallery
18 March—1 May 2021
Melbourne Australia

Gramart Project
Bushra Mir
Huma Mulji
Mubashir Niyaz
Moonis Ahmad Shah

Cover image:
Mubashir Niyaz,
Redaction, 2018,
video still

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The curatorial research for **Can you hear my voice?** began through conversations with Kashmiri artist and VCA PhD candidate Moonis Shah whilst on a field trip in India in early 2019.¹ Although I am Indian born and have been back many times, these conversations profoundly impacted my awareness of the complexities associated with notions of language, memory and national imagination. Returning to India a year later, this time travelling on to Pakistan my interest in how these themes can be discussed through contemporary art deepened. Nuanced and poetic, the works of Bushra Mir (Kashmir India), Huma Mulji (Karachi Pakistan), Moonis Ahmad Shah (Kashmir India), Mubashir Niyaz (Kashmir India) and Gramart Project (Madya Pradesh India) address some of the socio-political and metaphoric aspects of borders and ownership within the region.

¹ In 2019 a group of staff and research students from the Victorian College of the Arts (VCA) visited Delhi and Kochi. The trip was funded by the University of Melbourne's Centre of Visual Art (CoVA)

² Haider 2014 director: Vishal Bhardwaj; co-producers: Vishal Bhardwaj, Siddharth Roy Kapur; co-writers Vishal Bhardwaj, Basharat Peer; leading actors: Shahid Kapoor, Tabu

³ Mir, Bushra, unpublished artist statement 2021

⁴ Niyaz, Mubashir, unpublished artist statement 2021

⁵ The term 'not here to fuck spiders' can be understood as 'here to get the job done' Urban dictionary <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Not%20here%20to%20Fuck%20Spiders>

Bushra Mir's video *Awaaz* 2019, quotes Vishal Bhardwaj's 2014 film *Haider* which is set in Kashmir and based on the William Shakespeare play *Hamlet*.² The protagonist Haider returns to Kashmir following the disappearance of his father. Layered with symbolism, the film references 1990s conflicts and civilian disappearances. With a noose around his neck Haider asks Hello...can you hear my voice? His question has a chilling potency in light of the Indian Government's 213-day internet blackout in Kashmir commencing 4 August 2019. Mir describes *Awaaz* as *an audio-visual assemblage, where the words seem to exist without meaning. Everything is audible but becoming increasingly unintelligible*.³ She multiplies Haider's voice into echoes, diminishes his scale and scatters his image in patterns like a screen saver. His poignant words become diluted and insignificant – his eloquence quickly turning into ubiquity and drab.

Mubashir Niyaz states that his role as an artist, *is to try to put the viewer closer to their daily reality, to evoke ideas of historicity, memory, space, human and nonhuman characters involved*.⁴ Constantly morphing and evolving, Kashmir is presented in a state of flux in his video *Redaction* 2018. A lurid hybrid of digital animation and documentary style cinematography, *Redaction* points towards ideas of ritual and everyday experience within the context of change, tradition, history and continuity. The camera sweeps over Kashmir folding and unfolding its rural and urban features in and out of each other. Depictions of markets and mosques, mountains and lakes, earth and sky, peace and violence, prayer and protest suggest that in Niyaz's Kashmir everything exists at the same time and there is no separation or isolation in the process of transition. The hyperreal colours and the rough 'edges' of the video position Kashmir in a glitch – a state of instability or dysfunctionality in which nothing is completely aligned and the zone between lived experience and vicarious experience is increasingly blurred.

The title of Moonis Ahmad Shah's sculptural installation, *We are here to fuck spiders* is derived from an Australian slang phrase in which 'fucking spiders' is a euphemism for wasting time.⁵ Atop the narrow 4 metre plinth grows a mini landscape of undulating natural grass planted with LED letters that read THE VALLEY OF ETERNAL HAPPINESS. Like the iconic Los Angeles' Hollywood sign, text is used to mark out, label, claim and identify territory. Closer inspection reveals the work's dark sarcasm - the warmth and romance of Shah's sentence is undermined by other elements of the work. Whilst the front of the plinth follows the tropes of a white pristine museum support, the reverse is strewn with a tangle of electrical wiring and littered with cut grass. Responding to an algorithm-based soundtrack sourced from official broadcast speeches proclaiming normalcy in Kashmir, the lights constantly flicker and the whole sentence fails to light up completely. *We are here to fuck spiders* problematizes the representation of landscape as an object and its subsequent territorialisation in the context of contested sites such as Kashmir.

⁶ Mulji, Huma, unpublished artist statement, 2020

⁷ <https://gramart-project.org/about/>

⁸ The seeds: Amaranthus, Spinach, Roselle, Bottle Gourd, Purslane, Senna Tora, Carrot, Brinjal, Chilli, Tomato, Coriander, Fenugreek & Cucumber

⁹ Gramart Project, unpublished statement, 2021

Huma Mulji's suite of photographs *Dry Cleaners* 2016-21, depict the batmen of Pakistan Army officers. The term 'batman' dates back to the British Indian Army. A batman's duties included acting as a runner to convey orders from the officer to subordinates, driving the officer's vehicle, acting as the officer's bodyguard in combat, digging the officer's foxhole in combat, and other miscellaneous tasks.⁶ Contemporary batmen are no longer part of the fighting component of the army but continue to perform some of these duties such as delivering their master's dry cleaned and ironed uniforms. In Mulji's series, the uniform can be considered as a skin through which identity is assumed. Providing humorous insight into notions associated with the presence and absence of authority, these works question the role of the uniform in the public persona of the officer. Is the officer an officer when he is not wearing his officer's uniform? Regardless of his level of authority and level of accomplishment, an officer still needs his batman to do his laundry.

Gramart Project is a collective of farmers, artists, women, makers working in and around the village of Paradsinga Madhya Pradesh, India. *Our village is just like any other Indian village... people migrating, people aspiring for jobs to escape the poverty ridden circle of agriculture, people living in a patriarchal society, people trying to stick to their traditions, superstitions & religious beliefs...*⁷ Gramart's *Seed Calendar* is literally a calendar lovingly handcrafted from local resources, each page of which is embedded with seeds.⁸ After each month, the biodegradable page can be buried so that the seeds can be sown, grown, cultivated and consumed. One day of each month is circled in indigenous cotton hand-spun yarn to remind the world of the rights and struggles of women. *For us, the fight is not for transformation from a patriarchal to a matriarchal society. It is rather for moving towards an egalitarian world which is free of exploitation; including gender-based disparities*.⁹ Rigorously sustainable, *Seed Calendar* weaves local and universal issues into a sensitive and imaginative understanding of time and place. The calendar is a reminder of the passing of the seasons. The presence of seeds within the fabric of each page suggests potential and growth. Not recognising the arbitrary borders of humankind, their connection with geography is more dependent on the forces of nature.

Although the works in **Can you hear my voice?** do not depict specific incidents pertaining to India and Pakistan's relationship since gaining independence from British rule in 1947, they emerged from a context in which the contestation of borders and ownership is part of daily life. Whilst intensely localised, these reverberations of colonisation have global resonance.

Dr David Sequeira
Director, Margaret Lawrence Gallery