

Zarina Bhimji, 'Flagging it up'.

Curated by Fiona Bradley.

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'Flagging it up' is not a survey of Zarina Bhimji's work, however, similarly to the 2021 survey exhibition 'Zarina Bhimji: Black Pocket' at Sharjah Art Foundation (SAF), it also spans over 30 years of her work. Fruitmarket's ground floor galleries juxtapose Bhimji's latest film *Blind Spot* (2023), shot in London this summer, and her classic photographic installation from 1987, *She Loved to Breathe - Pure Silence*. The upper galleries display two wall works: the photograph *Shadows and Disturbances* (2007), which portrays a crumbling, yet scintillating, façade of a palace in Kutch, India, and *Untitled*

(*A Sketch*) (1999), a frame holding three children's Peter Pan collar dresses made from atlas maps of the United Kingdom, East Africa and India, the geographical nexus of Bhimji's family migratory story.¹ (Bhimji was born in Uganda to parents of Indian origin, the family migrating to Britain in 1974 when Bhimji was 11 years old.) The sparse hang of the two wall works makes them act like footnotes to the two black box installations also in the upper galleries: *Out of Blue* (2002), Bhimji's first film, and *Waiting*, a shorter film from 2007, both shot in Africa. In this selective display, 'Flagging it up' showcases selective moments from an oeuvre shaped or informed by the aforementioned transnational, migratory journey, but that extends beyond it to obliquely speak of the generalities of violence and pain, beauty and reparation, mainly, but not only, through the materialities of light, sound and camera movement.

She Loved to Breathe - Pure Silence is a photographic and sculptural installation, which invites a kind of cinematic viewing in the round. One is immediately struck by the gravitational tension of its component parts: four photographic plexiglass panels, suspended in a row from the ceiling on fine wire, seem to float in mid-air around eye-level, while the ground beneath them, covered in heaps of turmeric and chilli powder, compels the gaze downwards. At the same time, the linearity of the row determines the viewer's motion: a pacing from left to right and round again, each of the four panels displaying images on both sides. Consisting of eight hand-tinted, gelatin-silver prints mounted on muslin and sandwiched between plexiglass

¹ In a previous interview with Sonia Boyce, Bhimji stated her desire to create works which bring together objects, fantasies and memories from East Africa, India and Britain. See the catalogue *I Will Always Be Here*,

sheets, the images allegorically speak of wounding, a sense which is compounded in the phrases of blue stencilled text, with odd letters and words in red, that can be read above each image. Walking from left to right, one first encounters a photograph of jewellery laid out on a cloth, though not the bangles worn by Ismaili girls mentioned in the accompanying text. The following image is of a dead bird laid out on a net. The third juxtaposes the bird and a woman's Indian slipper, while the final panel holds two latex gloves which since 1987 have acquired a deep bloody brown discoloration that only adds to the work's affectivity given that they allude to reports in British newspapers in the late 1970s about the illegal 'virginity tests' carried out at Heathrow on South Asian women to ensure they were not or had not been pregnant before they might be allowed into Britain.²

This 'securitisation' of borders is further emphasised on the reverse side of this panel which displays a print of a visa stamp from the Home Office Immigration Department dated 1975, Bhimji associatively layering stories in the media and autobiographical signifiers. The other three reverse images portray the bird in different configurations: posed alongside two Indian slippers; an overexposed image in which its form is hollowed-out; and finally, lying on some straw, as if in preparation for burial. The stencilled text alludes to pain, racist abuse and the transmission of transgenerational trauma through a mother's milk. Only the red bits can be easily deciphered, the blue being harder to access, especially on the reverse sides, the faint

² She provides a number of quotations from the British newspaper, *The Guardian*, published in February and March 1979: "Immigrant women are being subjected to intimate gynaecological examination on entry into Britain."

inscriptions becoming traces that allude to the fading of memory and its recoding in art. While the spices evoke joy in cooking, as well as the Indian ritual in which women friends and relatives rub a bride's skin with turmeric before her wedding, the work speaks to the inheritance of anger and sadness, as well as intimacy. Interestingly, referring to her work around this period, Bhimji stated that she did not necessarily choose 'materials for their sensual qualities. I am attracted more to their vulnerability, the possibility of decay' (in ref the artist in conversation with Sonia Boyce, in *I Will Always Be Here*). Vulnerability is here combined with resistance, it being noteworthy that red chilli powder was used as a means of defence against National Front attacks in Bhimji's teenage home city of Leicester.

Bhimji's ongoing interest in vulnerability and decay is writ large in *Blind Spot*, which is a cinematic meditation on the dilapidated interior of a Georgian house. Shot in Bhimji's signature style of slow zooms into space and tracking shots that come to rest on close-up obstacles to vision, *Blind Spot* differs from her previous films in which, while there is always a densely layered sound design, there is no dialogue, reportage or voiceover. By contrast, *Blind Spot* is narrated by the actor John Lightbody. Opening on a disorienting point-of-view shot from the exterior basement of the Georgian house, as the camera moves into the interior of the uninhabited building, the narrator, a welfare officer of some kind, recounts a succinctly edited story about 'Amina', a Muslim girl he is helping with a housing application following a foster placement. 'Amina', the voice informs, had earlier been in care after she was estranged from her family who had arrived in the UK as refugees. The girl's 'westernised' behaviour had brought paternal wrath

down on her, such that social services had to be involved, the final straw being locked out of the family home after returning late at night and being subsequently found by an uncle, 'a family friend called "uncle" who took her home for the evening'. The strumming percussive soundtrack and the slow-paced voiceover pause at this point, generating an ominous silence that opens up questions in the viewer's imagination about what may have happened to 'Amina' on that night. Resuming, the narrator goes on to describe Amina's journey from being in care to being placed in a foster home, which a concluding statement refers to as a place that encouraged discussion of 'class and racial and feminist consciousness'. The narrator makes specific mention of a Mr Bartholomew and a home called Charles House, all of which have a Dickensian ring, but the slow-paced rhythm of the narrative, in conjunction with the zooming in and tracking of the camera, undo any pinning down of the facts. Instead, the predominant focus is the camera's exploration of the buildings' interior dilapidation, its dismantled walls and floorboards and exposed electrics allegorically alluding to emotional disarray. The staining left after the removal of fireplaces and fragments of wallpaper add to the feeling of psychic displacement latent in the narrative. Any definitive positioning is further complexified by the film's intense focus on reflected light, specifically the sunlight that filters through the elongated Georgian windows. At one significant point, while the camera rests on light dappling on the floorboards — an effect of the wind on the trees outside — the sound of water predominates, transforming the image's luminosity to liquid and evoking other places and times, other journeys. This shadow play of rippling light on floors and bare stained walls intimates

a more hopeful story, an idea reinforced by the voiceover's allusion to the aspirational working-class education offered through the placement, as well as by the camerawork's conveyance of a sense that the building might also be in a transitional state between decay and reconstruction. Exiting the film installation, one inevitably reencounters *She Loved to Breathe - Pure Silence*, the abuse and violation inferred but never named in *Blind Spot* being retrospectively heightened by the juxtapositioning of the two works.

Golden light and deep shadows enrich the worn beauty of the architectural features of the palace at Kutch in *Shadows and Disturbances*. This image was taken when Bhimji was researching her film *Yellow Patch* (2011), which is set in India and is sadly missing from this exhibition, given that two of three countries literally mapped in *Untitled (A Sketch)* have a film devoted to them. While *Blind Spot* was shot in London, Bhimji's first film *Out of Blue*, which was commissioned by Okwui Enwezor for Documenta XI, was shot in Uganda, Bhimji having returned there for a visit in 1989, her first since her family were exiled due to President Idi Amin's edict in 1972 that all Asian-Africans had to leave the country or reap the deadly consequences. A sequence in *Out of Blue* in which the camera moves methodically through a graveyard in which many Asian-Africans were buried testifies to this ethnic cleansing which stripped Asians of their African identity and Ugandan nationality. *Out of Blue*, especially through its soundscape, is haunted by a kind of posttraumatic effect of violence, although there is no direct depiction or invocation of war, the closest image being an unsettling durational shot of rifles stacked against an ochre-tinged wall on which, eventually, shadows of the upper torsos of armed persons flit by. Bhimji's insistence that the film is

about the beauty of the landscape and of the tradition of landscape painting in western art holds up in the opening and closing image sequences, the film beginning with a panoramic view of a forest shrouded in morning mist, birdsong predominating. After dawn, the mist and heat are identified as smoke and fire, the soundtrack's layering of amplified fire crackling, indistinct clips from British radio warning 'those with Asian nationality', and ululations and gunshots invokes the terror of violence. Bhimji has said that she wanted to make links to the genocides of Kosovo (1989-2002) and Rwanda (1990-98) rather than simply to personal history or a specific moment in history. Although an artist need not be taken at their word, the tragedy is that, at the level of generality, all genocides are the same: the violent erasure of peoples, bodies shot and burned, buildings destroyed. One of the strangest, because literal, image sequences is a durational closeup of burning logs that look uncannily like human limbs. The soundtrack is dominated by a female voice, Abida Parveen, making improvisational breathwork sounds which are both structured and rasping and then, what looks like a finger breaks off one the 'arms', the whole sequence becoming an unexpected allegory of the violence of bodily dismemberment. Because bodies are inferred rather than actual, and the singing, so guttural, the violence gets under the skin before one becomes consciously aware of it, the emotional aftermath of which is gut-wrenching.

Another moment in which the film connects to the ongoing violence of the displacement of peoples is the sequence in which the camera, at a respectful, or necessary distance, shows the interiors of the stone built military huts in which woven rugs lie side by side on the bare ground in

overcrowded encampments containing the barest of utensils to maintain life. It is unclear whether these are militia or refugee camps, but the image evokes the continual enforced migrations of people from war torn or totalitarian countries who, if they are fortunate, are herded into temporary border zone encampments hoping for asylum. Rather than people, Bhimji portrays the forlorn objects left behind – the rugs, lone sandals, plastic cups - that infer the precarious border between life and death. However, the film's focus on how sunlight filters through the openings of these temporary encampments is suggestive of hope. The film becomes grimmer and grimmer as it moves through a prison. Tracking along the black and brown stained walls, and pausing on barred windows that emit no light, the film visually alludes to absent bodies, to the torture and deaths that occurred in these cells. The sonorous echoes of Parveen's Sufi singing on the soundtrack makes the film both elegy and mourning.

Moving from calmness to disturbance, *Out of Blue's* concluding phrase returns to the beautiful: the camera pans across a stretch of vibrant green foliage and rich red soil, and rather than showing decaying colonial and rudimentary military buildings, it captures indigenous architectural grass-roofed huts near which children are playing. The camera retains a hovering distance that avoids sentimentality, while perhaps re-finding traces of happy childhood memories prior to enforced exodus. Interestingly, in relation to this more reparative aspect of the film, the earlier vegetation fires, while evoking bloody violence, were actually part an agriculturally regenerative process of burning bracken to encourage new growth. Earlier discomfiting shots of the abandoned airport building at Entebbe, reminiscent of a post-

apocalyptic site of trauma, are redeemed by the final intercutting of footage shot from an airplane taking off on the runway, the movement evoking both loss and freedom, the film ending on the abstract luminosity of a clear blue sky.

While *Out of Blue* undeniably stems from Bhimji's heritage and migratory journey, her exploration of this can only be from what she calls a position of 'belatedness' that she relates to a line to TS Eliot: "We had the experience but missed the meaning". You can never return to what you didn't have but I need to make sense of those moments' (Bhimji cited in Demos, 2012: 25). It is the positionality of 'belatedness' that I would hazard enables both the specificity and generality of historical violence and traumatic displacement latent in her films. The concept of belatedness has been elaborated in psychoanalysis. I'm not saying that Bhimji is referring to or interested in psychoanalysis but that for me Jean Laplanche's reworking of the Freudian term of *Nachträglichkeit* as 'afterwardsness' or 'belatedness' is a useful way to understand how aesthetic signifiers might retrospectively come to fill in for, or metaphorize, the absence or lack of understanding of traumatic experiences that are inherited through generations (1976).³

Laplanche's theory is based on the infant's premature exposure to the

³ the neonate encounters the unconscious of the adult and their desire before it can understand its meaning Laplanche calls the enigmatic signifier of unconscious desire Laplanche calls the enigmatic signifier of unconscious desire retrospectively attempt to work through this initial riddle of sexuality, the enigma of which generates the uncanny effects of displacement and proximity, familiarity and strangeness. the work of art, as is the work of memory, is a symbolic working through of early affects and sensations which we did not have the means to understand at the time we received them –These enigmatic messages, which relate to the fundamental questions "what does the other want of me?" and "where did I come from?" Laplanche's notion that as children we pick up the traces of our parents' unconscious desires without understanding them and this motivates us to fill in the gaps of our understanding by means of representation. Laplanche calls this gap, which is generative of symbolic play, the enigmatic signifier (1999

enigmatic messages of the adult's unconscious which cannot be deciphered at the time, but which motivate a retrospective decoding. This idea of 'afterwardsness' is evocative of how an artist might use material signs such as light and sound to retrospectively make sense of what is always a traumatic, because not understood, encounter with the other. This originary trauma is compacted by historical circumstances such as war and displacement. To both honour and lessen their grip on the psyche, an artist might make sense of these enigmatic messages by inventing forms and gestures that 'speak' them in a non-verbal register. I find this a useful way of thinking through the tensions at play in Bhimji's works between, as she puts it 'lyrical, intense beauty and sociopolitical language [...] through the visual it is important to me to remain allegorical even if I touch the subject of politics' (cited in Demos, 15). Interestingly, this citation is in reference to *Waiting*.

Waiting is shot in a sisal factory in Kenya. It is a peon to the materiality of the material itself and the mechanical processes by which the fibres, used to make sacking and ropes, are extracted. Rather than focussing on labour, the film homes in on the raw material's billowing fluffiness and the interplay between fibre and light. Occasionally odd workers are blurrily glimpsed on the edges of the dense mass of fluffy material that suffuses the screen, disappearing the hands and machines that pummel it. The layered soundtrack is a haunting mix of indistinct radio broadcasts, factory machines, birds, sirens and Parveen's breathy singing. It is melancholic and macabre. Other sequences focus on the waste fibres and dust that settles in corners and hangs from mechanical girds, the smoky

grey and dusty beige tendrils creating a claustrophobic choking atmosphere as if the material waste, like an alien life force, is sucking the vitality out of its surrounds and clogging the machine. That this is a miniature allegory of colonial capitalism is underscored by the shift in the film from an intense closeup engagement with the bulging material to final longshots of the factory's interior, in which strands of sisal ropes hang dejectedly from the girders that support the structure of the corrugated-iron building. While sisal is still processed in Kenya, it was once a primary commodity export having been introduced during British and German colonial rule. Now, the main producer is Brazil, global capitalism's vampirism finding other places to deforest and suck dry. Bhimji has said that she associated the white fibre with the cut hair of European colonialists. This did not occur to me, but I was reminded of wigs worn by French courtiers, kings and judges, the film's animacy of the material giving it a strangely embodied ghostly presence as if power had come to rest in a graveyard of its own making.

While the exhibition's select span of work might have been more complete with the inclusion of *Yellow Patch*, there is a striking continuity between Bhimji's claims in relation to her earlier work that 'History is silently communicated' (cited in Haworth-booth, ref) and *Blind Spot*, which, while using narrative, is always probing the unsaid latent in what is spoken, its images and sound design conveying unspeakable affect. Bhimji states that: 'I am more concerned with the interior than the exterior of the body, with what goes on inside. I imagine emotions ranged inside us, organised like filing cabinets' (ref). 'Flagging it up' gives voice to this abstraction in works that journey to and through architectural and landscape sites of

transpersonal and historical trauma. The gaps of diasporic consciousness are poetically honoured in forms that re-find enigma in a belatedness that in turn allows viewers in turn to inhabit memory-objects that travel through history, place and time.

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