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# مشروع ليلى

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# Zulfi kar

## *Ali*

## *Bhutto*

Zulfi kar Ali Bhutto is a contemporary artist of Pakistani-Lebanese-Iranian descent based in the San Francisco Bay. His work, which has spanned mediums from photography to embroidery to archive animation, explores the richness of liminal spaces often inhabited by diasporic subjects.

As well as commenting on the complexity of contemporary subjectivities, Bhutto also addresses the colonial past and theorizes fantastical futures based off contemporary socio-political trends.

Indeed, Bhutto's artistic practice is not limited to the visual arts as he uses performance as a means to dissect the relationship between religion, nationalism and gender. We got the chance to meet up with the artist himself in Beirut, right before Art Beirut ended, to discuss what making art means to him.

Interview/Cynthia Jreige  
Edited by Salome Auberger





*'Zhayedan Dulha' 5ft x 4ft - screen print on muslin, embroidery, various printed fabric, gold plastic trimming (from the series "Tomorrow We Inherit the Earth")*

**Can you tell us a bit about your background, I heard that you're Iranian-Pakistani-Lebanese, is that correct?**

Yes, my father who died when I was six was Pakistani and his mother was Iranian. He lived in Damascus in the 90's and my mother had also moved there from Beirut towards the end of the civil war. They met through a mutual friend. I was born in Damascus and lived there until I was three and a half years old at which point my father moved us back to Pakistan. My family is very political. My grandfather was the prime minister of Pakistan but was overthrown by a military coup in the late 70's and was executed; because of that my father exiled from Pakistan. Our move back to Pakistan was very complicated because of this political turmoil, my father became an elected representative in the parliament though he wasn't really part of mainstream politics either. It was a little tough living in Pakistan but I stayed until I was 18 and I do very much love the country, its landscape, its people and the huge diversity of the place. I started moving round for school. I went to the University of Edinburgh first to do an undergraduate degree in history of art then I went San Francisco to do my MFA, and decided to stay there.

**How did you know you wanted to pursue a career in the arts? Have you always been artistically inclined?**

Yes, from a young age I was very into art but I was also very into the environment and politics. I initially went to university to do a degree in environmental studies but I was so depressed because I was not into it, it was great doing the sociological aspects that deal with interactions between landscapes and humans but when it came to the mathematics side of things, I wasn't cut out for it, so I switched to history of art.

I had always known that I wanted to do something creative but I had also always loved historical research and analysis. Even though the art I make often projects you into a futuristic world, it is very much informed by history. I was always really interested in how disputed history is even though it's taught in schools and colleges in a very factual way. I think that in the Middle East, South Asia and maybe also in the African continent, people are very aware that history is never really true whereas in the US and Europe, there is less of an understanding that history is contested because the winners are the winners and they have been for so long. However, in our histories it is more complicated than that, the winners are often the colonisers, sometimes the indigenous people, there is more of an understanding that history is contingent on power relations.

I've always been interested in history as a kind of story rather than an actual documentation of something, and how we use archives to legitimise historical facts even though they don't necessarily prove anything either. I love playing with that, so in this series I've been taking many things including video and photography, and creating tapestries that I call 'hero tapestries'. They're very much informed by Shia artwork, such as banners, flags and portraits and South Asian aesthetics, mainly in Pakistan but also here, I've noticed there are cross-overs.

**Why did you choose to manipulate textiles over other medias?**

I chose fabric initially in a series called 'Mussalman Musclemen', which I've kind of laid to rest now but it started in a used bookstore in Pakistan. I found this book which was an Urdu translation of an Arnold Schwarzenegger exercise book. It was a pirate copy so it wasn't one book but was split into five or six, which I thought was very interesting. The pages were filled with images of muscular, generally speaking white European, American Anglo-Saxon men in tiny booty shorts and moustaches, a very 70's-80's aesthetic. They were essentially images of the butch-gay stereotype, but it had an Urdu script; I knew I wanted to do something with it. Fast forward two years, I graduated from my MFA program and was going through a phase of not really knowing what to do. I had done a textiles project at university which was a complete experiment. I taught myself embroidery, I was very impulsive, learning from mistakes, googling things...I caught on to it eventually. There's something about textiles, you are really building with fabric, cutting and slicing and replacing and it feels so firm. It's very nice and comfortable to be able to hold and touch your art.

So at that point I scanned the pages of the book, printed them and replaced the muscle with flowery textiles so they became Frankenstein-like figures. It was interactive in that you could open the stomach and see flowery textiles underneath. The series was a commentary on the fragility of masculinity but also on the force of it, I wanted to show that behind the hardness of the masculine facade is a potential for softness.

I was also playing with culture because of the juxtaposition of the language and the bodies. It was interesting because people in the US couldn't necessarily read the text and they would often think that the script consisted of verses from the Qur'an and that I was making a commentary about Islam and homosexuality, but I wasn't! I love how the combination of the language and the images put people's brains into this other world. I created the series in a way that was both didactic, so I could say the idea behind the piece so that viewers could follow through with it if they wanted to, but also if people didn't want to know the intended idea that was not a problem for me, I didn't mind if people made their own assumptions.

I take a lot of inspiration from South Asian poster art, eulogising art where the craftsmen are unnamed, such as religious or political posters or tapestries that end up being used everywhere, or prints that become iconic but no one knows who made them. It's rendered unimportant who made them, what's important is that they were made and they were made with love. So that's how it started, there's something very tactile and accessible about textiles, a lot of people understand textiles and fabrics.

**Would you want to work with fabric again in the future?**

Yeah I love working with fabric! The series I'm working on now is definitely taking on its own life. I'm working a lot with bodies but also with objects, objects of war and conflict, such as gas masks, bazookas, grenades. I'm using hero portraits with the names of the figures on them which all start with jayedan, which is a Farsi word for immortal, it's a very old word.


I wanted to flip the idea that they are deceased, by saying they are elsewhere, suggesting a continuity. I'm a lot more into objects now, taking generally ugly objects like gas masks and bazookas which are not pretty things, and making them beautiful. At the same time by doing this they become obsolete. A bazooka with flowers in it doesn't fire, the intervention in the piece removes the violent intention.

**It sounds like your cultural background is a big inspiration for you, maybe more than what came after your move from Pakistan?**

Yeah, huge, huge. I was a documentary photographer as well for a while. I was very into the dark room, I was in love with the process of producing a photograph which is also why I like using screen printing and fabric, because it's very tactile, I physically do the process from start to finish. I would gather the photos, edit them on Photoshop, print them, screen print them; I loved black and white photography, dark room photography, analogue photography for that reason.

When I showed the photographs that I took in Pakistan to San Francisco audiences I was told to try and take photos here in the US, to try and work within the context I live in. And I felt so depressed because I just couldn't, it was really tough for me to include that in my work, and it's not because there isn't anything in the US to care about, there's a lot going on. I moved to Oakland first before San Francisco during the height of the Black Lives Matter movement, I was present at the marches and was also involved in indigenous rights campaigns. I tried to get to the point where I could make art about these issues but I felt very stopped short. It didn't feel genuine, it felt like I was trying.

Even though it was very ingrained in my head as a child, I never processed the leftist lineage that I grew up in. I feel like as I entered adulthood, I could read about the wider context of it all, what it was like to live in the places my father lived in, what it meant to travel at that time, about the Non-Aligned movement.. This helps me to process the history I was constantly told to be loyal to. Loyalty is a funny thing because it can be unquestionable but it can be confusing how unquestionable it is. That history I was immersed in was a very heterosexual, macho, leftist history and I wanted to see it through my own lens, to turn it into something I could own, to make it mine, and this is what I do through my art. This is why archives are so important to me.



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I kind of stopped taking photographs after a while, even in Pakistan, because I started to question the role of documentary. There were certain people I would photograph in a completely natural way where there was an exchange, it didn't feel uncomfortable or exploitative in any way. For example, I focussed on documenting male homo-centric cultures in Pakistan because they were very open and accepting of the photographs being taken. But there were many instances where it felt exploitative, it felt like the bulk of the power was with me, and this didn't settle well for me. Taking photos of poverty felt very uncomfortable which led me to rethink my own path in documentary photography, so I decided to put photography to rest and turn my attention to archives. I did video first, starting in a minimal way, by editing them a bit without any voice or sound intervention. Then it got a bit more complex when I started to work with books and photographs as I was scanning and reprinting. I also do animation with archives, which can be quite sci-fi.

**Do you feel more in touch with the video side of things?**

You know, it's a mood thing. Like with performing, there are times when I get really into it and go at it for hours then there are times when I feel like I need to be doing something more tactile so I start embroidering. Sometimes I also feel creatively stuck, I'm a bit of a workaholic, so I go back and forth between mediums a lot until I find the one that works.

As of late video has been taking up a lot of my creative time. Much of my research is looking specifically at videos, from old queer films that look at the intersections of revolution, queerness and Arab identity - Jean Genet's *Un Chant d'amour* in particular - to interviews with those on the frontlines of resistance, such as Sana'a Mahaidli, widely accepted as the world's first female suicide bomber.

My series *'Tomorrow we inherit the earth'* is named after a line in *Ghosts* (Tayf), a Mashrou'leila song. They say this line at the end of the song and it had a real impact on me when I heard it. It felt like such a queer anthem, like we may not feel it's ours to own yet, we may not feel like this is our space or our history but it will be, tomorrow is there.

**Did you see them perform in San Francisco?**

I did! I really love their music and when they came to San Francisco I was so giddy, I'm kind of embarrassed by how much of a fan girl I was. What's happening now with the decriminalisation of homosexuality in Lebanon and in India really speaks for what is going to happen in the region. It may not just be positive, decriminalisation doesn't just mean tolerance and acceptance, but it's a good start, it means people are fighting for equality. In my current series I'm using textiles, video and polaroid photography to make an archive of a future.

**How do you feel in terms of your national/cultural identity? Do you make a point to communicate it through your art?**

I identify strongly with being Pakistani because I lived there for basically my whole life, but we would visit Lebanon or Syria once a year for at least a month or two. My mother was very good at reminding us that we are also Lebanese, that that is also part of our identity. My Iranian grandmother was from a family that lived in an India that then became Pakistan. She rarely went to Iran. My Iranian identity is very much remembered through my grandmother's demeanour and her Shia faith, rather than through understanding the culture or the language. She wasn't a conservative person but she was proud to be Shia, she didn't cover her head and wasn't stereotypically religious but she was very proud of her heritage. As a result, I associate the Shia part of my heritage with an Iranian-ness even though there's also some on my mother's side but anyway.

It's a little bit of a complicated thing, identity, I go back and forth. Now in the context of the United States, I don't want to be pigeonholed as a Pakistani artist but I'm also not ashamed to have that associated with me either. The fact of the matter in my work is that my mixed background plays a huge role, so I don't want people to label my work as just Pakistani art. I feel like my identity has been pulled back and forth across the region and I want my art to reflect that. It has a pan-Islamic, pan-Asian quality, if we want to go that way, you know what I mean? I like going back to the 70's when there was a kind of Islamic bloc 'fighting against the West', and 'Islamic' was not only framed in a religious way but as an opposition to capitalism, to the West, to imperialism. At the time, the connotations of denoting 'Islamic nations' were very different to what they are today. Today people would think of hard core militant Sunni Islam. When people ask me to present myself in a bio I don't stick to one thing, I prefer to say that I'm mixed, and in the context of the US it's important to make that claim, especially right now. I don't want to be the safe artist, I'm very proud of the fact that I'm from Pakistan and was born in Syria.

**Do you identify as being Arab?**

Partially, it's there, it's definitely there. I was in Lebanon in 2006 during the war when Israel invaded and it was at that time that I felt the most Arab I've ever felt in my life. We stayed for the whole duration of the war, we left a few days before the ceasefire. It was a very emotional experience because my grandfather on my mother's side was dying at the time and the family was there, we could have left but we decided not to. Experiencing all of that, as a sixteen-year-old Pakistani, really made me think about identity. The fact that I suddenly felt so Arab, even though I had been going to Lebanon or Syria for two months every year and was born in Syria, was really revelatory. Arab-ness wasn't strange or foreign to me, it was my mother, I knew parts of the language, I could sort of get around in Arab countries, but yet I felt suddenly very Arab during that war which made me realise how identity is solidified through violence and opposition. As you said people often say 'No we're not Lebanese we're Phoenician' but ask that question again during the war; ask what Arab-ness means when you feel Arab-ness is being attacked. People's identities are strengthened when they feel like they are under threat. Identity is so fluid, and so informed by a sense of collectiveness, of going through a communal struggle. It's like: we're all being bombarded by this nation, that nation's ship is in our harbour, suddenly it was our harbour, suddenly.



*'Zhayedan Hasan Ibn Abdul Lat' 5ft x 5 ft and 'Guerrilla War' 30 x 12 - screen print on muslin, embroidery, mirrors, printed polyester cotton, gold plastic trimming and glue. Install shot at Twelve Gates Gallery (from the series 'Tomorrow We Inherit the Earth')*