Title
Displacement, Dislocation, and Dispossession

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A retrospective, “Zarina: Paper Like Skin,” and a symposium, “Strangers in a Strange Land: Art, Aesthetics, and Displacement,” at the UCLA Hammer Museum celebrate Zarina’s artistry and consider themes that she has addressed during her long career.

Curated by Allegra Pesenti of the Grunwald Center for the Graphic Arts at the Hammer Museum, “Zarina: Paper Like Skin” is the first retrospective of the Indian-born American artist Zarina Hashmi, or Zarina, as she is known professionally. Showcasing approximately 60 of her works, most of which were made on or with her preferred medium of paper, the exhibition beautifully chronicles over 50 years of her expansive international career. Held in conjunction with “Strangers in a Strange Land: Art, Aesthetics, and Displacement,” a symposium organized by Saloni Mathur, Associate Professor in the Department of Art History at UCLA, and Aamir Mufti, Associate Professor in the Department of Comparative Literature at UCLA, in celebration of the themes and questions that Zarina’s work raises for scholars of all disciplines, the exhibition brings critical attention to an artist and practice often overlooked.

The exhibition begins chronologically with the 1960s, tracing Zarina’s keen interest in both the art of printmaking and woodcuts, forms of expression and craftsmanship she encountered during her time spent in Europe and Asia, only to end with some of her more iconic projects from the 1990s into the present. This includes...
Where Zarina may have once identified strictly and comfortably as an “Indian” artist, such a designation became somehow insufficient in the wake of her family’s displacement. Indeed, their decision to move to Pakistan instilled in Zarina a profound sense of loss, giving way in her practice to the exilic sensibility, quiet but nonetheless commanding, that comes to fruition in works like *Homes I Have Made/A Life in Nine Lines*...
Home is a Foreign Place (1999), one of four of Zarina’s larger works displayed at the exhibition’s core. The piece is a masterful series of 36 woodcuts printed on handmade Indian paper that artfully and intimately meditates on the meaning of “home” in a time when histories of displacement, dispossession, and social fracture call into question the concept’s very foundations of stability and safety.

As its title affirms, however, the exhibition also stands as a forceful inquiry into the materiality of Zarina’s artistic practice, and considers seriously, perhaps for the first time, Zarina’s sustained and critical affinity for paper. Paper, as Pesenti contend in the exhibition’s thorough catalogue, is more than just a medium of choice central to Zarina’s process and production. A portable and pliable surface with varying properties and histories often reflective of its region or culture of origin, paper has become a lifeline, a constant, in Zarina’s practice. Its use is indicative not only of Zarina’s meticulous technique and the genealogy of her training both as a printmaker in Paris and a student of woodcuts in Japan, but perhaps more critically of her own story as well.

As seen in works like Fence (1976), an embossed print perforated at its edges by a rim of sharp indentations, paper is, in a way, unmasked in Zarina’s practice as both a material and a discursive field, at once a point of entry into a larger thematic and the very point itself. Fence remains notable not only for its significant ties to both Minimalism and Conceptual Art but also for the violent process of incision and perforation it keeps hidden within its finished form. It is a violence not unlike that embodied by Zarina’s later woodcut print Dividing Line (2001), an abstracted meditation on the Indo-Pakistani border that is also emblematic of Zarina’s cartographic turn in the twenty-first century. Paper quite remarkably bears the marks of Zarina’s own biography, resonating in particular with her experiences of displacement and dislocation, homelessness and exile.

Born in 1937, Zarina came of age at a precarious time in Indian history, essentially on the precipice of partition. Though her parents, both Muslims, would initially elect to stay in India following the tumult of 1947, her family was forced to shift across the border in the 1960s and forsook their ancestral home at Aligarh and with it Zarina’s firm identification with the subcontinent. Where Zarina may have once identified strictly and comfortably as an “Indian” artist, such a designation became somehow insufficient in the wake of her family’s displacement. Indeed, their decision to move to Pakistan instilled in Zarina a profound sense of loss, giving way in her practice to the exilic sensibility, quiet but nonetheless commanding, that comes to fruition in works like Homes I Have Made/A Life in Nine Lines (1997), a collection of nine etchings of varying floor plans, each paying homage to a place Zarina has called home, both in India and abroad. As the exhibition also underscores, this sense of loss was in many ways complicated further by the increasing amount of time she spent traveling between Europe, Asia, and North America. Having left India herself in the 1950s prior to her family’s own departure for Pakistan, Zarina embraced a more nomadic existence following her marriage to a diplomat.

This profound struggle of self and subjectivity is one of the more critical threads made visible through Zarina’s use of paper by the exhibition’s juxtapositions and intersections. It unfolds, moreover, as a set of tensions and elisions in her practice, harnessed vigorously by Pesenti’s otherwise simple exhibition design. Where, for example, the first two galleries affirm Zarina’s relationship to the Western modernist canon—emphasizing works like Kiss (1968), a relief print from collaged wood with unmistakable ties in its composition to Constantin Brancusi’s sculpture of the same name, and Untitled I (1973), a silkscreen printed in white on silver board that attests to
"Zarina: Paper Like Skin" is on view at the UCLA Hammer Museum through December 30, then it will travel to the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York City and the Art Institute of Chicago. The exhibition catalogue features essays by Allegra Pesenti and Aamir Mufti, an interview with the artist by Sandhini Poddar, a curator at the Guggenheim, and images of Zarina’s pieces that are not in the exhibition.

the profound impact encounters with Kazimir Malevich’s work have had on her foray into abstraction—the latter galleries bring into view Zarina’s poignant and elusive use of the Urdu script, a language at the heart of a literary and visual tradition unique to South Asia, one Zarina, through her practice, repeatedly claims as her own, as her “mother tongue.”

Urdu, however, is not merely a counter in her practice to the Western influences that have so clearly come to shape her visual language, nor does it operate necessarily as a sweeping gesture back into her cultural heritage. As the exhibition emphasizes with works like Letters from Home (2004), a portfolio of eight woodcuts and metalcuts printed on handmade kozo paper that superimposes a series of letters, which Zarina’s sister had written to her about their parents’ passing, onto a set of abstract visual forms, Zarina’s use of Urdu and text more
broadly are an avenue into the personal, a powerful trigger for memory for Zarina predicated on a familiar dialectic, and even on its own form of displacement. While a viewer familiar with the script finds entry through Zarina’s practice into another realm entirely—to the culture, the memories, the historical complexities the language inherently evokes—a viewer unfamiliar with it stands obstructed before Zarina’s works, encouraged instead to engage with the script as part and parcel of the paper it inscribes, as a material of Zarina’s practice in and of itself.

The retrospective ultimately raises more questions around the artist’s practice than it attempts to resolve, and opens important avenues into Zarina’s work for scholars of modern and contemporary art. One of these questions, brought to the fore by a selection of her more recent works, including *Blinding Light* (2010), okawara paper gilded with 22-carat gold leaf, and *Dark Night of the Soul* (2011), laminated BFK white paper dyed with sumi ink and covered with black obsidian, is Zarina’s relationship to religion. While it would be a detriment to the scope of her practice to attach her oeuvre to any one religious tradition, regardless of her own cultural and religious background, the exhibition makes clear that interpreting her work as strictly secular in nature may be equally damaging. Zarina has said herself that her recent works dealing with darkness and light can be seen partly as a manifestation of her interest in the spiritual, an attempt on her part perhaps to “tie her beginnings to her ends” as she comes face to face with her mortality and embraces anew her Muslim heritage.1 “Zarina: Paper Like Skin” thus seems more like a debut than a retrospective, in a way marking a new beginning in an already impressive artistic career.

“Zarina: Paper Like Skin” was an effective starting point for the participants of “Strangers in a Strange Land: Art, Aesthetics, and Displacement,” a symposium held at the Hammer Museum in conjunction with Pesenti’s exhibition on November 8th and 9th. The symposium was sponsored by the UCLA Department of Comparative Literature; the UCLA Center for the Study of Women; David Schaberg, Dean of Humanities; Christopher Waterman, Dean of Arts and Architecture; and Professor Dan Neuman of the UCLA Ethnomusicology Department. It brought together an array of scholars—theorists, art historians, architectural historians, poets, artists and curators—in an effort to foster a comparative and cross-disciplinary conversation around the questions and themes prevalent in Zarina’s work: displacement, dislocation, uprooting and dispossession, all conditions and experiences that have increasingly come to shape the cultural and political dynamics of the present.

The opening address given by Homi Bhabha, author of *The Location of Culture*, among other important works and essays, set the tone for the two-day symposium. Bhabha, the Anne F. Rothenberg Professor of English and American Literature and Language as well as the Director of the Humanities Center at Harvard University, inaugurated the event with his own reading of Zarina’s works, narrowing in on the paradox of Zarina’s minimalist vocabulary—that is, the affect of her forms, the overriding sense of anxiety and unease at the center of her practice. In bringing a psychoanalytic frame to his analysis of Zarina’s works, Bhabha built on Pesenti’s inquiry into the materiality of Zarina’s practice in theoretically significant ways, interrogating Zarina’s affinity for the small. Bhabha looked to the scale of Zarina’s oeuvre, to the miniature as a critical point of access into notions of anxiety and trauma, where he was able to see Zarina’s practice not simply as the “replication of trauma and memory” but more persuasively as the “mise-en-scene of traumatic dispossession.”

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**Note**

1. This quote is paraphrased from a talk given by Zarina in conversation with Allegra Pesenti at the UCLA Hammer Museum on September 31, 2012, an event held in conjunction with her retrospective, “Zarina: Paper Like Skin.”