



Feeling the Doublebind

“Art is not beauty or novelty, art is effectiveness and disruption.”

León Ferrari, "Art of meanings," August 1968¹

The contexts of disruption and displacement cut deeply into the diasporic experience and thus the themes explored by the artists featured in *Doublebind: Art of the South Asian Diaspora*, an exhibition featured from March 31 to May 30, 2014, at the Ben Shahn Galleries, William Paterson University in Wayne, New Jersey. Inspired by the South Asian theorist Ranajit Guha's identification of the unique "doublebind" condition of migration, gallery director Kristen Evangelista chose five artists with ties to Bangladesh, India, and the Philippines, who work in a variety of media and have distinct perspectives on the South Asian diaspora: Jaishri Abichandani, Hasan Elahi, Naeem Mohaiemen, Yamini Nayar, and Jaret Vadera. Evangelista wisely focused on a small group of same-generation artists (born between 1969 and 1976) in order to feature multiple related works by each artist, encouraging a depth of conceptual and aesthetic experience for the viewer, while revealing related, opposing or unexpected relationships among artists' approaches. Oscillating between at least two cultures simultaneously, "doublebind" artists often straddle differing sign systems, idioms, cultural codes, and notions of perception. Personal experience is transformed into broader languages of art, myth and popular culture, articulated within individual artistic practices. Deploying photography, collage, sculpture, video, and new digital media, these artists examine the experience of "being of" and "being between" cultures, peoples, and geographies.

The emblematic linear boldness of **Jaishri Abichandani's** large scale wall sculpture, *Heartland* (2010) made an immediate impact centered on the gallery's far wall, compelling a closer look to study the materials comprising its form. Leather whips fabricated in the artist's native India outline *Heartland's* Janus-like, double-headed eagle whose imperial wings spread menacingly outward; a bulbous tail appendage is made of a cluster of plastic prosthetic breasts, completing a disturbing conjunction of literal material means charged with metaphorical suggestion. The flexible whips embed palpable histories of the horrors of slavery, self-flagellation for penance or to obtain spiritual ecstasy, manifesting themes of dominance and power. These same whips become wild arabesques of undulating lines and three-dimensional waves as Abichandani winds them into *Fountain of Youth* (2010), a free-standing sculpture erupting and spewing whiplashes encrusted with glittering Swarovski crystals. The flow of unleashed female sexuality merges with ecstatic spirituality in Abichandani's series of small clay figures, *Before Kali* (2013), evoking ancient terra cotta artifacts transformed into non-traditional hybrid goddesses varnished in gloss oil, embellished with crystals and set within vitrines. The artist activates multiple limbs and suggests narratives. With her language of intimate gestures, improbable bodily contortions and tactile expression, the artist centralizes the female perspective in manipulations of clay, refusing a disembodied history. By helping new meanings emerge from inchoate possibilities, Abichandani allows us all to become midwives of the imagination.

Revealing the “doublebind” oscillation of in-between fluid states, **Yamini Nayar** interweaves several artistic processes to create photographic C-prints of complex three dimensional architectonic structures which induce vertigo-like sensations of shifting perspectives within transitional spaces. The artist uses a large-format camera to photograph her own constructed sculptural environments assembled from an array of found debris, pieces of wood, fragments of Styrofoam, cut-out snapshots from magazines, the detritus of life which accumulates and takes on a character of its own. Nayar then demolishes her sculpted tabletop constructions, allowing the contingent, fragile moments embedded in objects and architecture to exist solely within her photographs. Having grown up in Detroit where her father worked in the once-booming automobile industry, Nayar experienced the transition of the city, the decay and abandonment of its buildings. Thus her large-scale C-prints, such as *Akhet* (2013) and *Past Present* (2013), suggest the cycles of life, destruction and rebirth. Urban realities are transformed into abstract structures, chaotic jumbles, which the artist has recreated, photographed and destroyed, leaving traces that are mysterious and unknowable, disjunctive yet poetic fragments. Alluding to the Egyptian hieroglyph for horizon as well as the season of inundation when the Nile flooded, *Akhet* tracks the reverberations at the very threshold of vision, marking the periods that shift from devastation to regeneration. Nayar intensifies the viewer’s experience of these thresholds, making them palpable in her photographs, as she tests how far memory and meaning can be stretched before the visual bond snaps.

Perceptual thresholds are also central to **Jaret Vadera’s** diverse media constructions, which include photography, sculpture, video and installation. His objects and the contexts in which they are presented provoke questions about how we represent and form meanings in “reading” texts and images that structure our experience and understandings of culture. Vadera seeks out the points at which these “given” sign systems break down, become permeable, porous or malleable, where glitches and short circuits upset our usual blasé consumption of images and data. His wall piece *X* (2014), which is made of metal, acrylic and pigment, seems to be a simple algebraic sign we learned in school to represent an unknown quantity or quality, a placeholder for the unknown. But its concision and compression represents the location of the “unlocated” within a diaspora, where it may represent loss, a removal or a ghost, marking a paradoxical yet poignant absence. *X* may be a destination, a catalyst for the desire to know, to find, or to colonize, where measurement means control and seeks power. Vadera literalizes notions of perception in his Rorschach-like cut-vinyl wall installation *All we see is vision* (2014), a kind of map, “a constellation of data” from Google searches that we process as memory in synch with bits of data from geographical areas. Vadera materializes the ever-changing flux of empirical scientific data-as-evidence, of measurement that offers quantitative information but does not add up to any qualitative meaning of being in the world. By encountering Vadera’s accretions of objects and installations we learn that vision is filtered and fashioned with physiological, cognitive, linguistic and technological limitations.

Occupying a room of his own around the corner from Vadera, Bangladeshi artist **Hasan Elahi’s** C-prints and multi-channel videos surround the viewer with stacked grids of surveillance images taken by the artist himself of places and things that accumulate like prison cells multiplying and engulfing the guard’s tower in Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon. Elahi is best known for his ongoing digital self-surveillance project, *Tracking Transience* (<http://trackingtransience.net>) that since 2002 has made transparent and viewable practically every aspect of his life. Now an Associate Professor of Art at University of Maryland where he directs Digital Cultures and Creativity in the Honors College, back in 2002, Elahi was erroneously arrested on misinformation while returning to the U.S. and was subjected to an intensive interrogation and investigation by the F.B.I., a harrowing experience. After he was cleared of suspicions, he conceived of the idea of recording his own movements via a GPS tracker and taking time-stamped

photographs, which he then continuously updated on his website. Elahi's *Waterfall*, (2013), a 12-channel video installation of pixilated images, traces three years of daily photographs, which display distorted, garbled images, ironically subverting the intended purpose of surveillance. Grids of C-prints that comprise *Altitude v2.5.1* (2011) document airplane food which Elahi consumed and *Brasilia*, (2011), with 2-channel video stills of 100 airports in 50 countries accumulated over 10 years, deploy photography to create spaces that run counter to those programmed within surveillance systems, creating phenomenological doubt about any "transparency" of images and data, uncovering the "translation" of perception and representation.

Naeem Mohaiemen, dividing his time between Dhaka and New York, deploys archival research interlaced with popular culture riffs and closely observed personal anecdotes to create narrative texts, videos, and photographs. His richly detailed and poignant prose piece, "Barbarians at the Gate," published in the exhibition catalogue, is an intimate conversation, a sizing-up between a doorman at the gate of a luxury condo in New York and the visitor-narrator, who transports us inside the shifting uncertainties of perception and pecking-order assumptions about how people of different ethnic groups and social status are expected to behave. The two men scrutinize surfaces for clues, while attempting to penetrate through the surface of things into the life-world of the other. Mohaiemen's video, *White Teeth* (2012), informed by themes in Zadie Smith's vivid, anarchic novel *White Teeth* (2000), is a mash-up of clips from several films (*Office Space*, 1999; *The Siege*, 1998; *Inside Man*, 2006; *Harry & Kumar Escape from Guantanamo*, 2008) concluding with an arch music video from The Cosmics, *Feelin' So High*, (2012). Within this cacophony of clips, Mohaiemen lays bare the stereotypical poses and conditions of masculinity that shape various cultures and opens up a conversation about the intended and unintended consequences of these poses and actions.

While the point of departure for the *Doublebind* exhibition may have been Ranajit Guha's observations of South Asian diasporic experiences, this generation of artists has reframed and complicated the on-going questions of displacement and migration, memory and perception, as counterpoints for exploration.

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ⁱ <http://icaadocs.mfah.org/icaadocs/THEARCHIVE/FullRecord/tabid/88/doc/755986/language/en-US/Default.aspx>