

ISSUE 1 (JUNE 2015): DECOLONIAL AESTHETICS

**New Poetics of
Translation:
An Interview with
Jaret Vadera**

Breach: By way of an introduction, can you talk a little about the evolution of your practice? About the *Light* series and your video installation *I tell the truth, even when I tell a lie...*?

Jaret Vadera: As far back as I can remember, I have always been making things, and breaking things. Taking things apart and putting them back together.

My parents came to Toronto as part of a large wave of immigration in the 60s and 70s. My mother came from the Philippines and my father from India, just a few years before I was born. They were working-class immigrants who came from different cultures, practiced different religions, and spoke different languages. Growing up in my family, in that city, at that particular time, set the stage for my ongoing explorations into ways that beliefs, codes, and processes of translation shape and control how we see.

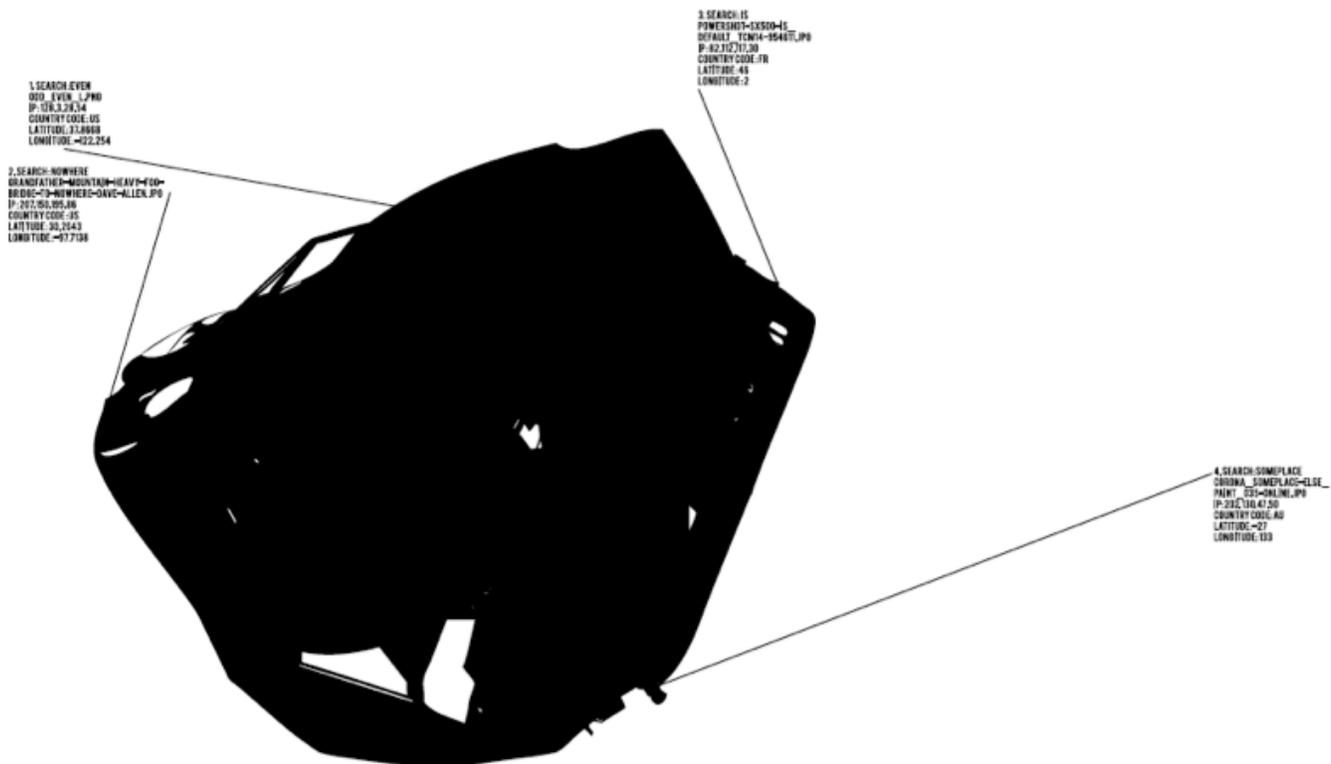
My first love was abstract painting. It was a seductive relationship but it didn't last very long. I got to a point, rather quickly, where I felt like it just wasn't enough. But what fascinated me then, and what still fascinates me today, was that I could make a mark, any mark, and people would always "see" something. They would read meaning into any form that I made, even if it wasn't my intention.

This fascination led to my interest in Rorschach tests, and my ongoing exploration into the different ways that abstraction can be used to understand how the mind works, and how we see. What we see, and how we "make" sense, is often a complex series of overlapping processes influenced by biological, cognitive, social, and technological biases. It is heavily influenced by our personal and collective memories and experiences. Two people who witness the same event often "see" very different things, as bias is inextricably built into

the process of vision itself. By understanding the invisible and unconscious processes through which meanings are constructed, I hope to understand where my blind spots are, and to reveal what is often hidden in plain sight.

The *Light* series, looked at the relationships between vision, memory, and perception, and it marked a shift in the way I was starting to think about my work. These were the first works where I wasn't just depicting some thing, or presenting the remainder of a process. In this series, I was more interested in facilitating a visual experience for the viewer. Personal and found photographs from old photo albums and public archives were embedded behind layers of translucent mylar and plexiglass. In each work, light would permeate through the translucent top layers and bounce back and forth between the surface and the photograph, creating a subtle glow. The images felt like they were floating just beneath the surface. When the viewer was standing far back from the piece, the image was blurry and half in focus. But when they would walk closer, the image would dissolve and eventually slip away. The images were ambiguous, neither this nor that, and always felt just out of reach. This subtle tension, of the *almost*, opened up a new space, that carried a charge, a new potential energy.

This was very exciting, and I wanted to push it further, so I started working on video installations. Projecting videos meant that I could make the experiences bigger, take over a space, and envelope the viewer within the work. *I tell the truth, even when I tell a lie...* is one of my favorite video installations. It developed out of my experience of watching a documentary about the U.S. marines in Afghanistan. Viewers often described this video installation as simultaneously seductive, sterile and violent, and this encouraged me to zoom in



EVEN NOWHERE IS SOMEPLACE (2015), Jaret Vadera, Vinyl cut on wall, 16' x 9'

further, to explore ambivalence. Ambivalence, not as a negative or indecisive experience, as some halfway point on your way to a solution, but as a condition, as a contemporary state of being, and by extension as a contemporary way of seeing.

B: When you refer to “ambivalence” in relation to *I tell the truth even when I lie...*, do you predominantly mean as a way of seeing? A state of comprehending and computing information? In one’s mediated relationship to a war of which they are distanced from? Or perhaps all of the above?

“My work often drags in the aesthetics of maps, X-rays, infographics, algorithms and equations, which often carry a weight of authority that engenders a kind of trust, and belief that feels almost religious to me. I am interested in subverting the sterile quasi-secular rational aesthetics of progress and control, and I often redeploy them as conundrums, or visual paradoxes, attempting to locate other spaces, or ambivalent in-betweens.”

JV: All of the above. And I think that this is why I keep coming back to this work, because all of the invisible layers of filtration, translation, and interpretation are overlapping, entangled, and represented simultaneously as a new mutated form in and of itself.

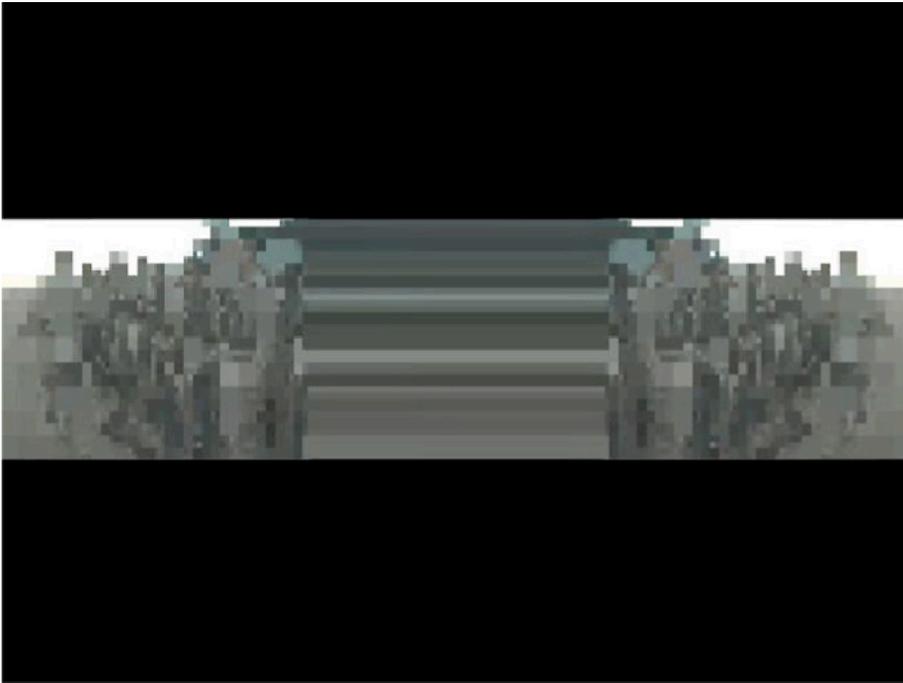
The original documentary about the U.S. marines in Afghanistan frustrated me on a number of levels. I felt a tremendous sense of anxiety and helplessness. And I used this work to understand how I was processing and digesting this footage. I was trying to make sense of my position to a war that I have only had a mediated experience of. My biggest ambivalence was that I knew that I couldn’t really trust this documentary, which fragmented, sterilized and at times glorified the violence.

In the installation, the mutated footage of a captain barking orders at his troops was projected, large, in a blacked out room, with the sound turned all the way up. I was trying to re-territorialize the physicality of the violence within the viewer’s experience, but also the distancing and sterilizing effect of the documentation.

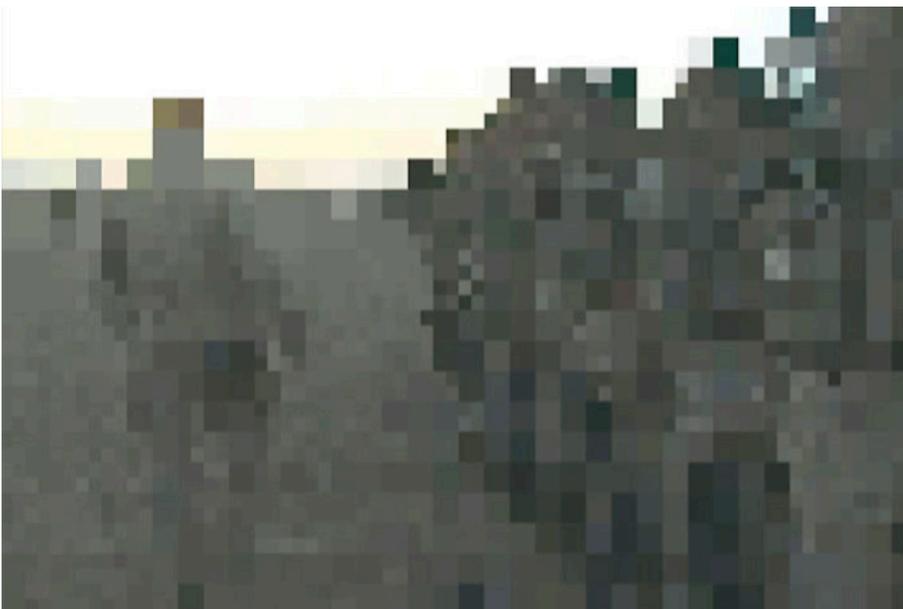
Pixelated static was used in the video to reference censorship, but also MARPAT, which is also known as digital camouflage. MARPAT, used in military uniforms, hides within the static of digital sighting technologies. MARPAT uses pixels to mirror the structure through which it is being seen, the digital matrix. The human mind sees the pixelated camouflage as noise, so it doesn’t focus on it. The camouflage hides within our technological/cognitive blindspots.

B: Your attempt to shift the viewer’s attention away from the *content* of an image to *the act of seeing* itself, which you began to explore with the *Light* series, is a theme that carries into much of your subsequent work. Have you, at times, found this to be particularly challenging, this task of emphasizing vision over content? Generally speaking, people are accustomed to make meaning through *what* they see, rather than *how* they see. I’m thinking here of Uta Barth’s *Ground* series, in which she seems to increasingly move away from any points of ref-

erence in her photographs—objects, architectural markers, a clear depth of field—from which the viewer might ground the image in some context, and thereby privilege the content over the act of seeing. Can you relate to this, or does the content of your work tend to hold equal weight to *how* it is seen?



I tell the truth, even when I tell a lie... (2009), Jaret Vadera, Video still



I tell the truth, even when I tell a lie... (2009), Jaret Vadera, Close up of video still

JV: I feel that seeing and content are inextricably linked. I am interested in highlighting the act of interpretation as an integral part of the process of creating content. I feel they go hand in hand. And yes, absolutely, it is definitely a challenge to work this way. Viewers can be suspicious of the strategic ambiguities or ambivalences that are integral to my work. We process data from the outside world without even thinking about it, so when I start incorporating open-ended loops, without a clear key of how to navigate through the work, people can, understandably, get quite frustrated and suspicious. If they are used to thinking about artwork as a *window*, and are expecting a “payoff,” the work can easily be dismissed as incomplete.

The *Light* series, was more like a mirror than a window. Well, maybe, more like a partial mirror, where you look through to see something else, but you also see yourself seeing. This tended, for most people, to evoke anxiety or a strong desire to “make sense.” Trust is important in the reception of art and it is hard to trust work like this. But, I believe that leaving work unresolved, in a charged state, with multiple ways of interpreting it, is difficult, uncomfortable, but is necessary now, more than ever. Our addiction to com-

fortable, convenient, and quick resolutions are reinforced everyday in consumer visual culture through advertising, television, and movies. We are encouraged to think less and consume more. We are trained to be sleepwalkers, encouraged to be hungry ghosts.

I like Uta Barth's work. I identify with her use of the blur, groundlessness, and the ways she talks about how we distort what we see through the process of interpretation. I often think of the act of seeing as a form of violence. But where Barth's questions seem to come from her relationship to photography and film, the *Light* series grew out of an old question I had as an abstract painter about whether or not one could create a work that was both figurative and abstract at the same time. I still think of myself as an abstract artist, but in a more expanded way now. Abstraction still has a lot of potential to address the politics of representation and to open up new poetics of translation.

“Where is the culture in your work?” is a common question that is often the beginning of the end of any conversation, and it is often a lose-lose no matter how I answer.”

B: Could you expand on how decolonial aesthetics play into your work, and how you attempt to “decolonize vision,” as you described it to me in our email correspondence?

JV: As a second generation, person of color, of mixed-descent, growing up in a European settler colony, you can't help but be acutely aware of the many different ways that one can see the world, and, simultaneously, of the dominance of a bias that privileges the priorities, languages, paradigms, and histories of the descendants of Europe. For over 400 years Europeans controlled or influenced a significant percentage of the world's population and those biases often became the invisible defaults.

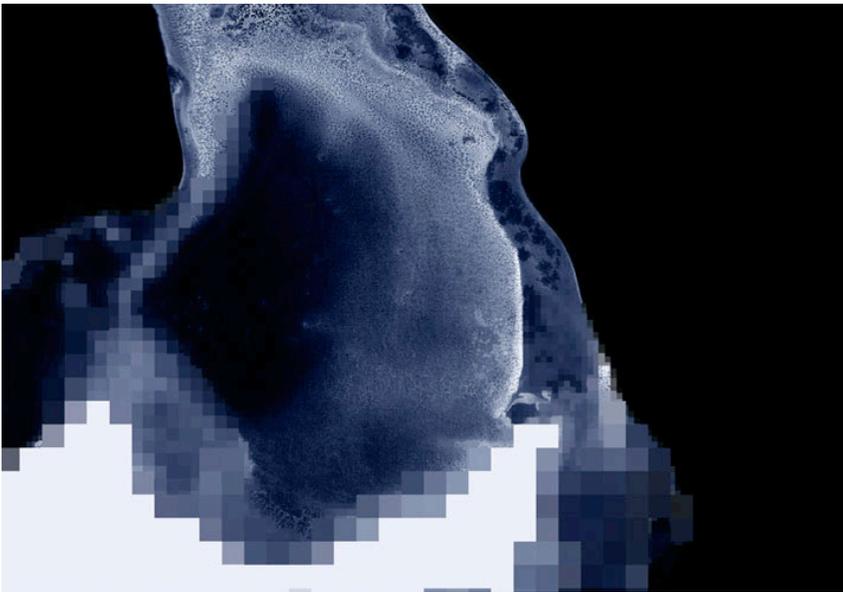
In order to think for myself, I have had to think about what I think, and where those ideas have come from. It is an ongoing process of learning, unlearning, and relearning.

Decolonial aesthetics is part of the unlearning and relearning part for me. Growing up here, going to art schools in Canada and the U.S., I have already learned to see with someone else's eyes. All the peoples of the world have always been making things, and for one way of looking at “Art” to hold dominion above all others is colonial nonsense. What is considered art, artefact, or material culture in North America is still terribly racist. I often refer to myself as an artist/cultural producer as a way to acknowledge the complicated relationship I have to the colonial undercurrents that still loom heavily in the art world/s.



1982 from the Light Series (2006), Jaret Vadera, Mylar and plexi on C-print, 30" x 40"

Through my work, I often unpack how myths, biases, and privileges are embedded directly or indirectly in the everyday, so that I can understand what malignant ideas I may be unconsciously taking in. So I don't eat the razor blades in the apple. My work often drags in the aesthetics of maps, X-rays, infographics, algorithms and equations, which often carry a weight of authority that engenders a kind of trust, and belief that feels almost religious to me. I am interested in subverting the sterile quasi-secular rational aesthetics of progress and control, and I often redeploy them as conundrums, or visual paradoxes, attempting to locate other spaces, or ambivalent in-betweens. I hope to delink them from their aesthetic aura of authority, and to explore potential new poetics of representation.



Untitled X from the Here be Dragons series (2009), Jaret Vadera, Duraclear on lightbox, 16" x 10"

B: Could you describe the process by which you create your works involving Internet image searches, for instance, *ALL WE SEE IS VISION*? How do you see these works in conversation with the aim of “decolonizing vision”?

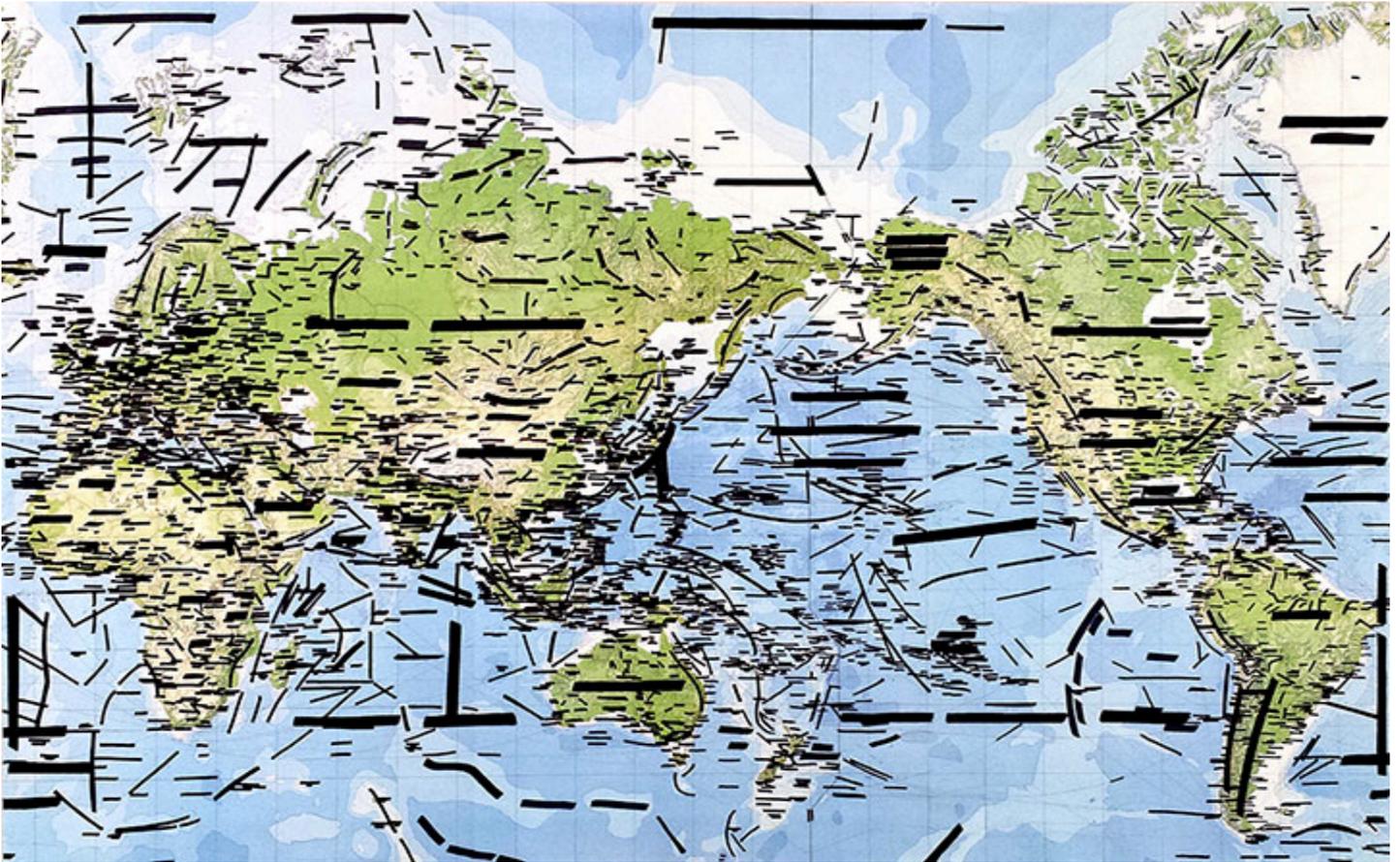
JV: This work came out of my overlapping interests in Rorschach tests, FM-RIs, and infographics, but also out of ideas about perception, illusion, and ego that have roots in South Asia. Contrary to the idea of the Internet as a free and democratic space, I often find that when I search in North America on the world wide web that most, if not all of the information culled, is from corporations from North America and Europe.

What is available in this archive, and the algorithms through which we retrieve information are crucial in determining how and what we see.

Early developers of the Internet talked about it as a mind. So in *ALL WE SEE IS VISION* I was interested in drawing parallels between neuronal networks and the Internet. I am proposing search engines as a form of memory. The algorithms for retrieving data shape how and what we see. Perception is inextricably linked to the technologies through which we are “seeing,” and are always highly dependant on memory.

I completed a search for each of the words: “all,” “we,” “see,” “is,” and “vision”. An image from each search was then downloaded, simplified and combined with the others. The search term, file name, IP address, province or state, and zip code for each image was then superimposed onto an invisible world map locating the places where the files were originally downloaded.

B: You seem to engage with decolonial aesthetics largely by focusing on colonizing ideologies, deconstructing and reconstructing these ways of thinking, seeing, and being in order to understand how they function. Often, and in con-



No Country from the Pangea Series (2014), Jaret Vadera, Black marker on world map, 36" x 48"

trast to this, some artists foreground alternatives to these dominant ideologies—alternatives that are often trivialized or misconstrued as “traditional”—and they are pigeonholed into the role of spokesperson of a certain diaspora or “marginalized” group, essentialized on the basis of their ancestry or racial categorization. Do you think that your choice to focus on and deconstruct colonizing ideologies has allowed you to avoid being cast in such a role?

JV: As an artist of color, I feel like my body, and the politics surrounding it, are still often read into my work. People like boxes. And this becomes trickier, when you are of mixed decent. My body can be a floating signifier or is often put into the wrong box. I am proud of the histories and the different ways of seeing that I have inherited and admire the work of many artists who make work that comes out of those parallel ways of seeing. But, my work often comes directly out of my lived experience. And just as there is no flag for *my* country, there is no one tradition of making things that is overtly legible, as inside or out, or that I feel a sole allegiance to. When you identify with three cultures, it is different than when you identify with one or even two. National-personal identities feel reductive, suffocating, and a bit over-performative.

You kind of get screwed from all sides. From inside and outside different communities. Everyone wants you to belong to one camp or another. So you would think that the forms and aesthetics I question and use in my work would get me off the hook in someways. But I think that it actually amplifies the desire to reduce, and can bring about another kind of frustration from un-



ALL WE SEE IS VISION (2014), Jaret Vadera, Vinyl cut on wall, 9' x 4'

invested people who just want to put you into conventional binaries. “Where is the culture in your work?” is a common question that is often the beginning of the end of any conversation, and it is often a lose-lose no matter how I answer.

Writing, curating, teaching, and organizing are also ways that I address some of these issues beyond the objects I make. It is often easier to be more direct in these different forms, and they can have a more direct impact. But I always come back to art, because once you understand how it works, it can be a space where I am free to be a strange, and unresolved, wielder of magic.

Jaret Vadera is an artist / cultural producer living and working between New York, Toronto, and India. Through his interdisciplinary practice, Vadera explores the poetics of translation and the politics of vision. His paintings, prints, photographs, videos, and installations have been exhibited and screened internationally. In parallel, Vadera has also worked as an organizer, programmer, curator, researcher, writer, editor, educator, and designer on projects that focus on using art as a catalyst for social change / justice.