

the closer i get, the further i find

JARET VADERA

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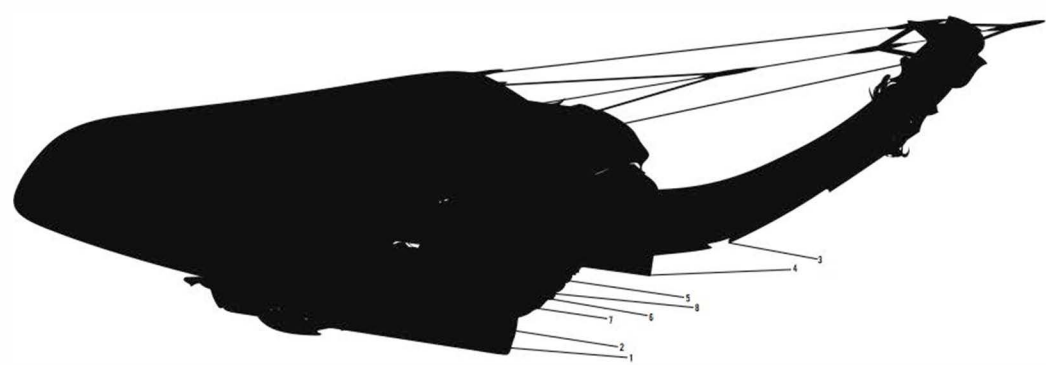
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Jaret Vadera

SEPTEMBER 8 - 30, 2017

Opening with the artist: Friday, September 8th, 6:30 - 8:30pm

Twelve Gates Arts presents a solo-show from Jaret Vadera, a transdisciplinary artist and cultural producer whose open-ended pieces challenge the viewer to reflect on history and the status quo. Originally captivated by abstract painting's ability to draw out reactions from viewers based on their own backgrounds, Vadera brings the essence of abstraction to his technology-based works. The pieces in *the closer i get, the further i find* explore the dynamic relationship between power, memory and representations of other spaces. Vadera completed his undergraduate education at the Ontario College of Art and Design University in Toronto and the Cooper Union School of Art in New York. He received his MFA in Painting and Printmaking from Yale University. He teaches courses on art, culture, and social practice at Pratt Institute, Yale University, Brooklyn College, and Montclair State University. Vadera's piece / always tell the truth, even when I tell a lie... was selected for the 1st annual 12G Video Art Festival (2015).



ASCENDING TO OUTER SPACE TO FIND ANOTHER RACE
vinyl
dimensions variable
2015

GHOSTS IN THE DISCARDED MACHINE

In Alan Moore's genre-reset graphic novel Watchmen (1986-7), the vigilante Rorschach is both societal outcast and the story's moral core. Trapped and captured by a brutal police force, he is put through his namesake inkblot test by a psychiatrist trying to probe his 'demented' mind. Looking at the ink splatter, Moore's antihero visualizes dead children, dismembered limbs and a dog's split-open head—all from moments of the near past when he crossed lines of legality to extract vengeance for victims of brutal crime. Looking up the ink soaked paper, he tells his interrogator, with the smoothest of poker faces, that he sees only flowers, birds and beauty.

Elements of Jaret Vadera's work in *the closer i get, the further i find* build a similar schema, looking at violence and silencing, and then refracting it through abstraction and distraction, leaving a puzzle box for viewers to unravel. Instead of the Rorschach test (invented by Hermann Rorschach in 1921), he parses contemporary Search Engines (invented in sequence by Archie, Magellan, Infoseek, AltaVista, and others) that map the searcher and searched. In Jaret's small-scale dystopias, unemotional algorithms have taken over from the human mind, but prove just as prone to refraction, distortion and deception.

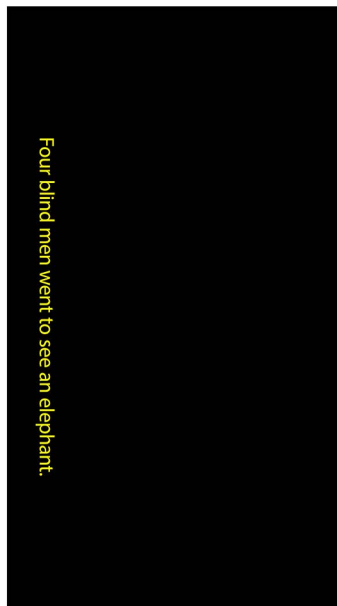
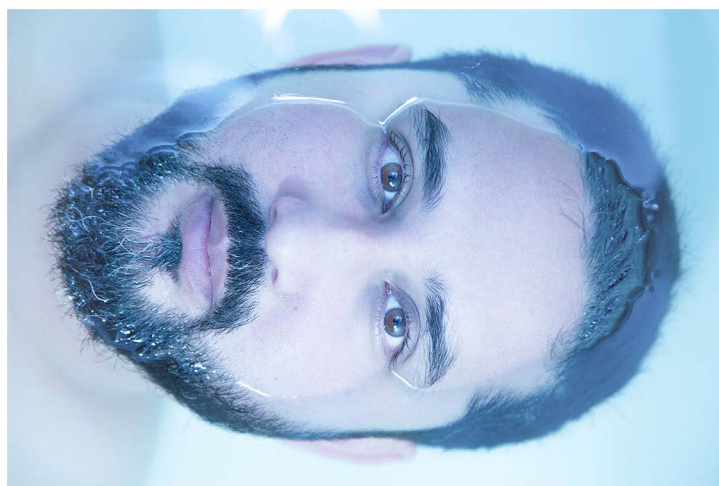
In a site-specific installation (2010) for the Ballard Estate Project in New Delhi, Jaret linked J.G. Ballard and a colonial port in Mumbai through search words common to both. In the subsequent build-up of *ALL WE SEE IS VISION* (2015), the results of image searches are layered in the computer to create a new aggregate image that is then outputted as a single vinyl form and mounted onto the gallery wall, annotated with the file names, IP addresses and server locations of the original source files. In the newest version *ASCENDING TO OUTER SPACE TO FIND ANOTHER RACE* (2015), he proposes new mythologies to replace older beliefs.

Vadera cites Stanislaw Lem's novel *Solaris* (1961) as a conscious influence. *Bladerunner* (1982) is another film that he has materialized in his studio. Vadera made a blue chroma video using the dialogue between avenging replicant and his creator Dr. Tyrell (called, inverting the original title syntax, 1982 (*Bladerunner*). In an ironic twist that is familiar to all of us who mistook motherboards as permanence, this project was lost in the digital graveyard of failed hard drives.

I walk through Jaret's work and think of other dreamscapes, where nightmares are rendered through the economy of comic books: the murderous superheroes of Alan Moore, or the conniving dream players of Neil Gaiman. His search engine games also seem akin to the moment in Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* (1997) in which one of the protagonists picks up a remote control and 'rewinds' the film in order to prevent his colleague from being shot. A person may choose what to remember and what to forget, but Palo Alto databases ensure you never escape the event.

[Expanded from a text originally written for Future Greats Asia 2014: Eleven artists to look out for Art Review (2014).]

~Nacem Mohaiemen is a writer and visual artist working in Dhaka and New York who explores the history of the international left and utopia.



Four blind men went to see an elephant.

clockwise from left: Sleepwalker, c-print, 2016, 12 x 16 in.
X, metal, acrylic, and pigment, 2014, 10.75 x 8 x 8.075 in.
still from On Kings and Elephants, digital video, 6-minute loop, 2015
On cover, Chronomad, c-print, 2016, 12 x 16 in.

JARET VADERA: SPECTRAL SIGNS AND FUGITIVE IMAGES

Working across various media, Jaret Vadera creates complex, cerebral artworks that generate and celebrate multivalence, strategically deploying paradox, entropy, and translation to decolonize ways of knowing and seeing initiated by Enlightenment rationalism. To critique prevailing epistemologies, Vadera's work often plays with representational modes that commonly serve as proof, document or evidence: photographs, maps, infographics, x-rays, and FMRI. He challenges the objectivity and authority attributed to these forms by consciously introducing glitches and aberrations, contaminating them with traces of subjective irreverence.

In *Untitled III* (2009), Vadera restages an early twentieth-century colonial photograph of the English monarch and the Prime Minister of Nepal triumphantly standing over the body of a recently shot tiger, simultaneously standing in for all three characters. In the image, two ghostly figures, one dressed in a striking body length black sheath, equal parts Matrix and Game of Thrones, the other in a pristine white jumpsuit and a mask, as if to avoid contamination, stand in a misty field. On the ground in front of them lies a third figure, Vadera again, face obscured, in grey fatigues, their camouflage pattern wryly evoking the tiger's stripes. Despite the Manichean color scheme, Vadera's decision to play all three characters subtly confuses the hierarchical structure of the original image, scrambling colonial power relations through the uncanny replication of the performative self. And by extending that performative gesture to the tiger, Vadera expresses a trans-species empathy that pushes ethics beyond the limits of the human.

Critical of the seemingly endless cycles of capitalist production, a condition that the contemporary art world is particularly culpable of, Vadera has become increasingly ambivalent about making objects. Instead, he presents constellations, presenting new and extant work in shifting arrangements that suggest new relations and meanings depending on the juxtapositions within a particular constellation, and the broader exhibition context. Drawn to found objects, Vadera uses cheap dollar store materials to embellish and transform them, a nod to the make-do aesthetics of his early childhood spent in immigrant neighborhoods in Toronto.

Indexing history through its abraded but gilded surface, *X* (2014) references the use of the titular letter in algebra, where it serves as a designation for the unknown variable, the solution of the equation. As Vadera evocatively notes, in this particular knowledge system X marks the "location of the unlocated;" it is a spectral sign, "a presence marked by its paradoxical absence." As such, it catalyzes "the desire to know, to solve, to colonize." Vadera's X poignantly encapsulates our existential discomfort and enduring fascination with the unknown, an anxious compulsion that drives the quest for knowledge, often leading to injustice and destruction. Yet it is also important to note that here X also designates an entity that is variable, multiple, unfixed, suggesting a complicated relationship between knowledge and fixity. Does the unknown merely indicate that which lies beyond the limits of current knowledge or can it point to something more profoundly troubling, an ontological disquiet that results from our acceptance of multivalence as an inevitability.

X appears alongside the short video *On Kings and Elephants* (2015). As an accented robot narrator tells three different versions of an ancient parable, in which a group of blind men attempt to describe the figure of an elephant, the text repeats in yellow subtitles on an otherwise empty black screen. Each man provides a distinct answer, his experience of the elephant's body limited to the part his hands could access. Those who touch a leg think it is a pillar. Those who touch the trunk think it is a waterspout or pipe. The ear is mistaken for a fan or carpet. The belly a big jar. An illustration of man's inability to fully grasp the vastness of the divine, the parable reveals the limits of objective knowledge. Knowledge and meaning are both partial and positional. Whole or absolute truth is impossible to comprehend, as perception and cognition, visual and otherwise, are limited by our embodied subjectivities.

Sleepwalker (2016), the third component of the constellation, is a photographic self-portrait loosely inspired by science fiction films. Bathed in the soft but antiseptic bluish white light that seems to always illuminate future utopias, the artist's face is captured as it begins to emerge out of water, its outline drawing our gaze to his eyes, their unflinching stare looking out not at but through us. What meanings does this triangulation suggest? Pushing us to philosophically reflect on the unknown, the first two works introduce doubt and uncertainty into our perception and interpretation of the third, in terms of both medium and subject matter. We question both the veracity of the photograph, and the singularity of the self that is portrayed in it. Pictured at a threshold between discrete states of being, symbolized by the transition from liquid into air, this is a liminal self, opening up into an abundance of potential. Evoking images of birth or awakening, the self-portrait is transformed from an image of being into one of becoming.

In the related *Chronomad* (2016), Vadera plays a time traveler, a mysterious figure spanning past and future, gradually accruing elements of both into his being. Here the cool blue light is stronger, emanating like an aura from behind the artist's body, which is turned away from us. A huge bundle-like protrusion rests on his head, embellished with plastic tubes and a glittery

fringe. Is this a turban or his hair? Is it the elaborate, possibly ceremonial, headdress of a shaman or the hastily thrown together belongings of a refugee? Or is it a symbolic self-portrait of the artist as a spiritual and temporal wanderer, bearing the burden of his shifting subjectivity on and in his head. Together the position of light and body partially silhouette the figure, making it difficult to definitively identify details. The image, like the figure it represents, never rests. It remains fugitive.

Interested in parallels between the Internet's hive mind and the neuronal networks of our brains, Vadera uses the Web's algorithms to demonstrate how contemporary technologies continue to shape and colonize vision and knowledge. If the Internet is a type of collective consciousness, an archive of the present, then the search engine emerges as a key structure through which we understand, remember, and are remembered in our increasingly digital world. To create the black vinyl wall piece *ASCENDING TO OUTER SPACE TO FIND ANOTHER RACE* (2015), Vadera fed the individual words of the titular phrase into an image search engine, selecting a representative image for each from the results. These images were then digitally abstracted and combined to create a suggestively ambiguous form that, like a Rorschach blot, allows for multiple interpretations. Finally, an invisible world map, indicating the geographic origin of each image file, is overlaid on top. The resulting shape is both corporal and mechanical, like a cyborg or some type of alien technology. Vadera's aphorism is an adaptation, or better yet a "mistranslation" of a lyric from a famous reggae track by Max Romeo and the Upsetters: *I'm gonna send him to outer space, to find another race.* While the original talks about banishing the devil from earth into space, Vadera's phrase parallels Afrofuturist strategies, embracing interstellar travel as a way to transcend racial injustice on earth. Here, the unknown of space symbolizes limitless potential, holding the promise of self-discovery and transformation, where racial identity can open up beyond proscriptive and prejudicial binaries. This space of multivalence, of infinite and radical difference, is where Vadera is most at home.

~Murtaza Vali is a critic and curator based in Brooklyn and Sharjah.



Untitled III, c-print, 2009, 7 x 11 in.

CONSTELLATIONS, TRIANGLES, AND MESSY MIDDLE SPACES

Two anonymous figures stare out at the camera as a third masked figure, clad in combat fatigues, lies at their feet. One is donning a black cloak, evoking the garb of a missionary, his facial features also masked. The other is in an all-white hazmat jumpsuit, his face hidden by a protective surgical mask. The landscape behind them bleak, hazy, blank, ominous. Who are these figures, captured in Jaret Vadera's work *Untitled III* (2009)? Lurking through the mist, they mark authority, fear, and danger, their trophy lays vanquished for all to see.

Studiously composed, *Untitled III* delivers an especially captivating image, arranged as a series of shifting semiotic binaries – black/white, civilian/military, victory/defeat, master/slave, danger/safety, illness/health. The work, Vadera tells us, is based on a photograph from the 1900s of the English King-Emperor and the Prime Minister of Nepal standing over the body of a recently shot tiger. Each element in the composition invokes a myriad of associations. The Bengali tiger as a symbol for Asian exoticism as well as danger; the modernist notion of the supremacy of man over nature; the defeated soldier standing in for the slain tiger; Vadera's use of modern combat fatigues visually referencing the American Gulf wars. Thus, the work actively connects past colonial

conquests, when Britain ruled over the Indian subcontinent, with contemporary wars fought by the U.S. striving to enforce its supremacy and imperial interests in the Persian Gulf.

Vadera stands in for all three characters in the photograph. Is this an attempt on Vadera's part to step into the shoes of those past and present figures, in a quest to gain an understanding of their different points of view? Bastardizing the image, Vadera inverts the colonial gaze, reclaiming authority over the production of meaning, complicating the colonial narrative, which sought to equate Vadera's ancestors with the simpleton mind, yet threatening prowess of the wild beast.

In this and in other works by Vadera included in the artist's solo exhibition *the closer i get, the further i find* – *X* (2014), *ASCENDING TO OUTER SPACE TO FIND ANOTHER RACE* (2015) and *On Kings and Elephants* (2015) – he strategically juxtaposes different image making processes, layering meaning, and creating new webs of associations.

Undermining the image as object of power, Vadera shatters the act of looking and being looked at into smithereens, glistening in a sea of new possibilities. It is in the constellation of these binaries – both within the image, as well as between the image and its earlier colonial referent in *Untitled III*, or between sound and lack of sight in *On Kings and Elephants* – that Vadera collapses the often too-easily made dichotomies between self and other, colonizer and colonized, past and present, man and animal.

While referencing colonialism's reach into the contemporary present, Vadera is pre-occupied with what he regards as our "neo-human" world, where people toggle between their admiration, on the one hand, and fear, on the other, of the nature they look to subdue, and the technologies they develop to serve them. Thus, Vadera does not limit himself to only questioning the narratives and power structures communicated through images of man, body and animal, but engages with the skewed ideological underpinnings of the technologies that produce them. Re-telling the ancient story of the Four Blind Men and the Elephant, a robotic narrator reads different English translations of the famous tale in *On Kings and Elephants*. Each blind man reports his own understanding of the elephant in front of him, having each touched a different part of the animal's body. Beyond the sage moral of the complexity of perception, Vadera selects a robotic sounding voice recognition software to read the story using an "Indian" female accent. Thus, Vadera calls attention to the human processes that inform these supposedly neutral machineries – defining what makes an accent "Indian," where to place emphasis, accentuation or a pause for breath in an otherwise rather impersonal voice, or how gender shapes perceptions of authority and compassion. In this work, accent pivots from a spoken audible linguistic code and a signifier of a hybrid cultural output, as explored by media scholar Hamid Naficy, to the unspoken interred codes that dominate the technologies that amplify and spread it.

"Code-shifting" becomes a pressing necessity when one's references are not found on any canonical maps, Vadera often says. Maps, like photographs, FMRI, or infographics, are all visual processes that organize knowledge and reinforce ideological positions. As modes of exchange and delivery change, so must the code-shifting tools in the artist's toolkit. For Vadera those include brain scans in a journey to scientifically grasp how this central organ in our body produces subjective cognition and consciousness. The new map produced by Vadera in *ASCENDING TO OUTER SPACE TO FIND ANOTHER RACE* offers alternative visual codes generating new tales of geography, place and peoples, by-passing conventional map making altogether. Using search engines, Vadera creates a composite image, alluding to an aircraft, or an underwater creature. The aggregate image is configured based on a search of each of the words in the work's title. The map is no longer a rendition of a physical place, but an amalgamation driven by word association, clearly and consciously gesturing narration and self-articulation. Yet this alternative deterritorialized representation, is then layered once more, by tracing and cataloging the server locations and specific countries where these images are stored. The catchall "X", as referred to in Vadera's work of the same title, is no longer the unknown absent to be desired, conquered, or explained. The legibility of the map owns its value to those very specific and named locales producing it rather than seeking to speak in universal truths in the name of all.

Seeing, visibility, and legibility take center stage throughout Vadera's works. Clarity comes into sharp focus only when the blurry, fragmented, visibly messy, and obstructed views are made apparent: the masked faces in *Untitled III*; a black screen, robotic sound, and a tale of blindness in *On Kings and Elephants*; an elusive "X" encasing a corrosive cracked-like surface in *X*; or a black sleek decal silhouette embodying complex data in *ASCENDING TO OUTER SPACE TO FIND ANOTHER RACE*. The object of sight is laid bare as an unreliable referent, probing viewers to look and look again through their blind spots curling and unwinding throughout the works.

Vadera is a master of multivalent constellations, meticulously forcing open the distance between things, calling into question matters as they should supposedly be, ceaselessly seeking to expose the paradoxes and other spaces opened up in between and through such juxtapositions. His work refuses to skirt around the parameters of the ubiquitous triangle of identity – self, other and context/object/technology. Rather, he invites us to dive right into the messy space in the middle, where the drama of meaning—with all its trade offs, nuance and complexity – is constantly fought, negotiated and played out.

~Livia Alexander is a New York-based writer and curator.