



Framing Authority

How does the state discipline its citizens? And how do people resist? **Jason Keith Fernandes** finds Bani Abidi asking these questions at her first Indian solo.

Bani Abidi. Security Barrier Type E – Jinnah International Airport, Karachi. Inkjet print. 11" x 16". 2008.

ONE HAD HEARD OF BANI ABIDI LONG BEFORE HER WORK WAS PUT up at GALLERYYSKE, Bangalore, from the 20th of April to the 28th of May. Abidi works primarily with video and photographic narratives and explores the relationship between the Pakistani state and its people. In the past, she has looked at how identities are negotiated by people caught between different versions of social and national history, and how a postcolonial state seeks to create new identities to assert its power.

The exhibition included *The Address*, a kitschy print that captured a TV screen showing the arrangements for a presidential address; *Reserved*, a double-channel, nine minute video installation showing a nameless South Asian city in a state of preparedness as it anticipated the arrival of a state dignitary; and *Security Barriers*, which comprised inkjet prints capturing the various kinds of road-blocks found in Karachi, Abidi's native city.

The Address and *Security Barriers* presented to us the disciplinary tools employed by the political elite to order its rebellious subjects into being ideal citizens. The background curtains, the portrait of Jinnah, the vase full of roses and the Pakistani flag in *The Address* helped create a background for the televised address made by the president of Pakistan to the people of

Pakistan - it fulfilled the role of invoking the idea of a nation that steamrollered reluctant groups within the state into toeing its line. The different kinds of *Security Barriers* showed off the power of the state - they created a space that ought not to be trespassed. Owing to the manner in which it repeated motifs from other exhibits, *Reserved* was the fulcrum around which the entire exhibition turned. Here, we were treated to the impact of a political dignitary's impending but never realized arrival. It showed school students waiting and getting impatient; security barriers erected to allow the motorcade to pass unhindered (resulting in traffic jams); self-important and concerned members of the welcome committee; and a slowly but steadily filling auditorium. *Reserved* has been described as indicative of "the paralysis of a system awaiting a leader, a lucid allusion to all forms of dictatorship and submission". Such a reading entirely misses the sense of agency that the citizens of this nameless city possess.

In fact, *Reserved* celebrated citizens' solidarity and their act of resisting the disciplinary apparatus of the state; it showed how people could domesticate 'official' situations, which the state thrust them into. You could see that the students, pulled away from their classrooms, were not cowed down at all; they laughed at the teacher who tried constantly to make them



Bani Abidi. *The Address.* C-print. 30" x 40". 2007.

stand in silence. Tempted by an ice-cream seller, they abandoned their posts for sweet relief. In spite of the security barrier pulled across the road, the police seemed unable to command complete obedience. The resulting traffic jam became a venue for some citizens to realize livelihood opportunities as they plied their trades. As people forged active relationships with each other, you could see a vibrant civil society in action.

In *The Address* and *Reserved*, Abidi depicted the setting up of an empty stage. In *Reserved*, this space was claimed by an irrepressible citizenry. Indeed, the cold decorations installed by the state seemed to stand in marked contrast to the ebullience of the people.

Reviews of Abidi's work have tended to talk about the power of the state and the impossibility of the growth of a civil society. It is possible, however, and perhaps important, to locate within her works, the impossibility of the state project. If the gallery had mounted more works, it would have gone a long way in fleshing out a statement by the artist - the severely restricted number of exhibits made the show a tad disappointing.

END-NOTE

1. **Sonia Campagnola.** *From Singapore to Gwangju.* FLASH ART. Jan-Feb 2007.



Bani Abidi. *Reserved.*
Double-channel video.
9 minutes. 2006.