

Art

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Bani Abidi

Virginia Whiles

PROFILE >

'THE QUESTION TO ASK OF ANY SITUATION IS WHO IS PROFITING FROM IT?' states Bani Abidi, whose videos and photographs document social behaviour by way of performance and improvisation.

Whereas performance may demand storyboarding and rehearsal, Abidi's practice also allows for chance. Two apparently different techniques of documentary and fiction filmmaking are united by her framework of humour, particularly irony: the tool so often shared by Pakistani people to deflate state hypocrisy.

Born in 1971 in Karachi, Abidi chose to study painting and printmaking at the NCA (National College of Arts) in Lahore, partly on account of its formidable reputation and partly to get away from Karachi. She completed her BA, unconvinced by her mark-making 'in the "guise" of abstraction, the easiest trope to use if you didn't know what you were doing', but it was the socialisation at NCA which was to serve her practice. Meanwhile, back in Karachi, big changes were taking place within its small art world through the foundation of a new school of art (Indus Valley School of Art and Architecture) run by a lively crew of young artists. These included Durriya Kazi, David Alesworth, Iftikhar Dadi and Elizabeth Dadi, who all had a huge influence on the younger generation simply because they addressed popular culture: the thrills and spills of the urban chaos forming Karachi became their subject matter. 'Their ideas made us value the narratives of contemporary life for the first time.'

Abidi then took off to a significantly modernist city,

Chicago, to study for her MFA at the Art Institute. Here she was to sense the diasporan dilemma of cultural identity, where roots were being replaced by routes in her reflections on postcolonial issues. Her work indicated this through references to both craft and kitsch. Abidi made delicate paper models of the stereotypical 'White House': the ideal home reconstructed by the nouveau riche throughout the classy green suburbs of Lahore and Karachi. These models were attached to portable rods like the *Taazia*, miniature replicas of Sufi shrines which are carried in processions at Moharram. On the walls of her studio Abidi painted *trompe l'œil* murals of the neo-Victorian decor favoured by the Pakistani elite, and she also made a DIY kit of a Mughal garden, using chipboard and plaster to recreate exotic tiles. She embedded postcard samples of colour coordination tips from Martha Stewart into votive boxes. Parody pervaded her reaction to an orientalist 'aesthetic of the veil' presumed of Asian artists by an American audience familiar with the works of Shirin Neshat and Shahzia Sikander.

At the film school in Chicago Abidi discovered directors who use humour in their socio-political narratives – such as Jacques Tati, Elia Suleiman and Abbas Kiarostami. This was a turning point which sparked off her own video practice. Her short video *Mangoes*, 2000, alternates the focus on two women, one Pakistani and the other Indian, who sit devouring mangoes and recounting childhood memories. Though they are in western dress and away from home, their genteel nostalgia slips into discreet nationalism when categorical comparisons are made. These are early variations on a theme which permeates Abidi's work: the ongoing antagonism between India and Pakistan. Abidi plays both women, accentuating the double bind of the artist herself, who, like so many others, has links with both countries.

This recurs in *Anthem*, 2001, a split-screen video showing two young women dancing to their radios, each

Bani Abidi
*Shan Pipe Band Learns the
Star Spangled Banner* 2004
video still



