

## Imagined Cartographies

*“What has your mother given you? At first I could only think of her wedding saree, jewellery; small mementos... but my feet are like my mothers. Looking at my feet I fall into a dream, washed over by cultural memory. Feet have always been important in our culture—representing movement, migration, setting foot on new land; the touching of feet, bathing of feet, decorating of feet. When a parent dies an imprint of their feet is taken in saffron on cloth. This simple act signifies that the parent’s footprint will always remain in the household to guide and direct. It is said that the way to heaven is through the soles of the mother’s feet.”*

—Zainub Verjee, 1997

Zainub Verjee’s *Through the soles of my mother’s feet* (henceforth *Soles*), 1997, is a four channel, eight monitor video installation with sound. The 16-minutes long artwork, with the images moving in a loop, is a poetic montage of the sensual, almost cellular, experience of place as it affects memory and identity. It is a tracing of cultural and personal memory and a reflection on the artist’s own family migration along with a part of the Ismaili community which moved from the western province of India, Gujarat, to East Africa and later to England and Canada.

*Soles* produced during the early-1990s when the artist explored their encounter with the idea of ethnography—both as an ideological tool as well as a method which Hal Foster later in the same decade theorized as the “ethnographic turn”. This modality offered the artist to map their trajectories within composite movements—of people, ideas, history and memory—enabling them to break free and articulate a new cartography of their identities. Embedded in these trajectories of memory—cultural memory of smells, rites and rituals—the videos blur the distinction between the conventional narratives in an attempt to reconfigure an appropriate form of memory—of representation and the self.

Inherent in this process the question foregrounded is: how does one represent the unrepresentable, the non-official narrative, and the myth? Thus, more than a witness, these

videos document and inscribe both the surveyed memory and the subject of memory. *Soles* makes an attempt to reclaim and reorganize definitions of Self by recoding representations through self-inscription into history. Defining a critical transversal aesthetic, Zainub calls this pattern of inscription a template of nomadic architecture – the physical and social structures which cultures take with them to maintain coherence with their histories. In this installation we see the circularity of images, like the journeying, these images travel across the screens. Zainub says, “nomadic architecture is about everything that has been given. It is about the passing on of language, culture, rites and rituals and a deeply rooted value system. Architecture includes not only built structures, but also the total way in which a culture uses time and space in conceptualizing its social existence. Nomadic architecture arises out the enquiry of the self and moves from the personal to the historical, geopolitical and the social terrain. From its inception, this work has been a dedication to the women in my community, and especially to my mother.”

Narendra Pachkhédé

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## The Pleasure of Journeying Home

The migration of masses of humanity is one of the characteristics of this century. Sometimes violent, often involuntary and always painful, migration has become a staple on the nightly news. Following edicts, fleeing wars, looking for food or simply for a better way of life, large groups of people are uprooting themselves or being uprooted. In this transitory context the nation of home becomes a place you leave, a place you go to, a memory, a dream, a somewhere and a nowhere. Finding home has become the preoccupation, the cause and the cure for many ills. At its most obvious, Zainub Verjee's installation *Through the Soles of My Mother's Feet* is one such quest. It is a specific quest of a woman rooted in a history, a migration, a faith, a culture, and a family. Personal and public, it is a many layered journey where the process of journeying itself posits questions and answers.

How to present such a journey is a challenge — one skillfully met in this four-channel, eight-monitor video installation. The eight-minute video visual is accompanied by a sixteen-minute soundtrack, allowing the viewer to re-view the same visual piece twice, within different soundscapes. Arranged in an octagon, the eight monitors and viewing benches represent contemporary equivalents of both a classroom and an obelisk — teaching and commemorating at the same time.

In Islamic architecture, the octagon is the formal transition from the square to the circle, which is important in the construction of domes. The square represents the earth and things temporal. The circle of the base of the dome is a perfect shape that is continuous, having no beginning and end, a profound symbol for Allah and His nature. The octagon as a transitional element represents the zones between the heavens and earth, and the spiritual journey that each *murid* or believer embarks on upon birth to achieve one-ness with the One. Within Ismaili cosmology the octagon also comes to represent the Imam in his role as to the *murid*, aiding in each individual's spiritual quest.

The Ismaili Jamatkhana and Centre, the space within which the installation is housed, is a multi-domed building which serves as the spiritual epicentre for the Ismaili Muslim community in Canada.<sup>1</sup> It is a structure with immense significance for this community which has been 'nomadic' in that it has migrated across Asia, Africa, Europe and North America in the past eight centuries.

Situating a video installation within the Jamatkhana structure is a testament to Zainub's skilful persistence over two years of negotiation and to the Vancouver Ismaili community's coming-of-age.<sup>2</sup> While the Ismaili community in Vancouver has produced and presented community art exhibitions in the Social Hall of the Centre before, this installation and collaboration with the Burnaby Art Gallery is a milestone. It is as if the community finally feels secure enough to open itself up to 'serious' art with all the mixed messages, controversy, allusions to modernity and

<sup>1</sup>  
At the Opening Ceremony for the Ismaili Jamatkhana and Centre on Friday, August 23, 1985, His Highness the Aga Khan stated "Today is perhaps one of the most exceptional days in the history of our Jamat at any time and in any part of the world. It is a singularly important day when a Jamat establishes a permanent new Jamatkhana in a country of its adoption, and this is what the Canadian Jamat has witnessed today."

<sup>2</sup>  
Zainub's faith community, the Shia Imami Ismaili Muslim sect, has been journeying for many centuries. The Ismailis are one of several sects which together form the larger faith of Islam. Prince Karim Aga Khan IV is the 49th Imam of the Ismailis. He is descended from Muhammad through the Prophet's youngest daughter, Fatima, and her husband, the Prophet's chosen heir and cousin, Ali. After Muhammad's death, Ismailis believe Ali became their spiritual leader. The Imam continues through his male line. Today, approximately 20 million Ismailis are scattered throughout the Muslim world, in Asia (particularly India and Pakistan), North and East Africa and the Middle East. Since the mid-1900s there have also been communities in the West — the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States in particular. The journey for a majority of the Ismailis who came to Canada was a forced one. Ismailis were uprooted by the edict of the demented Idi Amin Dada who ordered that all "Asians" were to leave Uganda by the end of October 1972. After three generations in East Africa, these Muslims of Indian descent (many of whom considered themselves to be African) left their home to go to another home in Canada.

post-modernity and, above all, the risk which such a collaboration implies. The installation itself is not controversial; rather, it is searching, recording, questioning, and in the process of its journey, affirming. It is presented with a self-assurance that bodes well for Zainub and her future work.

Predominantly from India and Kenya, the images presented include landmarks, cultural/art making activities and artifacts that serve as markers for members of the Ismaili community. These markers have been transported by the community in their 'nomadic' journey across the globe. Shown also are fixed architectural elements (including the very venue of the installation) that define the contexts as spaces within which the culture continues. In showing the diversity that exists in the Ismaili experience, the images speak significantly to the power of culture and culture-making in easing transitions. There is a sense of mournful longing for things we have lost along the way in the depiction of folk art being produced and displayed — the relationship of the hands to the made object that is not as valued in highly-manufactured-techno-busy North America.

There are images of hands making food (rotis and ladoos), crafting flute reeds and bed spindles, painting with mendhi, winding thread, making concrete mouldings, painting billboard advertisements, squeezing juice from the sugar cane, wearing saris, and cutting ornamental glass chips. There are images of gnarly banyan trees, bags of fresh tamarind seed pods and dried red chillies at market, fish hanging to dry on a line, and palm tree fronds. The built environment is captured via a worn Indian wall painting, courtyard walls with mashradlyyas (a screen element applied to window openings to provide shading, light and privacy), passing shots of village homes, ornate metal grill work on a spiral staircase and on gates, and a mausoleum in India. Finally the artist's personal family photos and the deliberate steps of a woman (the artist) making saffron water footprints on plain white cotton cloth round out the collection images. The saffron footprints segment is the only one that occurs on all eight monitors at different times, making it a poignant metaphor for the artist's own nomadic journey, as well as that of a whole community.

The sixteen-minute soundtrack is open to the aural interpretation of each listener. A base track of oars rowing and creaking underscores the nation of journey. It is further layered with distinctive sounds such as the Asaan (call to prayer) being recited, the singing of songs, bells, traffic and construction noises, someone thumping laundry against a rock, and churning water.

art protests such as the Artists' Coalition for Local Colour (1991) and exhibitions/performances such as *Self Not Whole: Chinese Identity & Chinese-Canadian Artists in Vancouver* (1991), to *Visit the Tiger: An Exhibition of Contemporary Visual Art by Artists of South Asian Origin* (1992), the *Home/Identity/Hybridity* section of METROPOLIS '93, and the *Moving Ground Underfoot* section in the Vancouver Art Gallery's *topographies: recent aspects of B.C. art* (1996) have raised the question (in one form or another) of where the work of artists of colour fits within the mainstream's spectrum of "professional" art-making.

What is the viewer to make of the installation? The answer depends greatly upon the viewer. Convenient categories serve to simplify and not enlighten, but sometimes such simplification is necessary. The installation obviously has many intended audiences. Zainub's installation, based within an Ismaili community space and imbedded in a particular history, at one level, calls for a reading which differentiates its audience(s) on the basis of experience. Those in the centre of the experience view the installation very differently than those at the periphery.

For those at the periphery, this installation, at its most obvious, could be described as being "multicultural" race-based artmaking, art based in "identity politics" and/or "community." Each of the latter terms is loaded with a variety of meanings and theoretical histories. Over the last decade, if not longer, the battle for artists of colour to have their work accepted has been placed with the paradigm of Race. Within the art politics of Vancouver, this installation could be viewed as yet another in a series of art exhibitions which have been very loosely conceptualized around notions of "race" and "community."<sup>3</sup> Each exhibition in its own manner consistently asserts that art produced by artists of colour is not "folk" or "community" art easily quantified, categorized, marginalized and appropriated. The fight by artists of colour (for lack of a better term) to gain acceptance within the art world has gone beyond the stage of seeking recognition from the mainstream. More importantly, what these shows demonstrate is that regardless of how a mainstream audience may view art from communities of colour, the art-making continues.

It would be a mistake to view Zainub's work solely within the race-based paradigm of the 1980s. Hybrid identities, geographical dislocations, and fused histories make it more difficult to differentiate between "us" and "them," "coloured" and "white" and "inside" and "outside." In the late 1990s what is becoming clear is that artists of colour are choosing their own forms of expression, creating their own definitions and critical dialogues. They care less and less about whether or not the "them" or the "outside" audience "gets it."

As Ismailis who have travelled much the same road as Zainub and thus close to the centre, we find that the installation has many personal resonances and meanings. The Azaan creates a soulful stirring. The tamarind and chilli sacks make us salivate with thoughts of tart and hot chutney eaten with samosas and bhajias, preferably from Kaby's. We are initially puzzled by what the reed maker is making, though we recognize this task from watching our mothers and grandmothers perform similar actions to make cord for beading tasbihs (rosaries). The mendhi brings to mind celebration and the word "appropriations." Now that the mendhi has become all the fashion rage, it somehow seems devalued by its overexposure in recent fashion magazines. Its decontextualization from something that marks a special event to the aesthetician's chair in hair salons is both saddening and maddening, yet inevitable. Seeing the

**Sherazad Jamal** is an artist, writer and mother.  
**Zool Suleman** is an editor, writer and cultural commentator. In 1992 they co-founded *Rungh* magazine.

Imam's crest (known as the Taj) on the grill work of Fort Hall Jamatkhana's gates from Nairobi brings up sentimental attachments to both the image and the place. In a community whose secular leadership has guarded the use of specific images, the use of the Taj is a reminder of the near past. The Taj used to be used as the signifier of Jamal institutions. It has recently been replaced by Islamic calligraphy. It is as if we are acknowledging a shift in how the community and its institutions see themselves moving towards the future. Though significant to us... to other viewers this image is barely note worthy.

It is impossible to be from within the East African Ismaili community and not to feel a personal connection to this installation. In invoking this personal response, the installation and its creator have formed a mini-reality. A weaving of memories, journeys, textures, images and sounds which in specific viewers, combine to create a sense of home. Not a home that exists physically, but rather a home that exists ephemerally. Through this installation Zainub makes her own contribution to the Ismaili artists that will follow her. Perhaps the video that the next generation makes will incorporate the landscapes, sounds and images of this place. And when they do, we will truly be home.