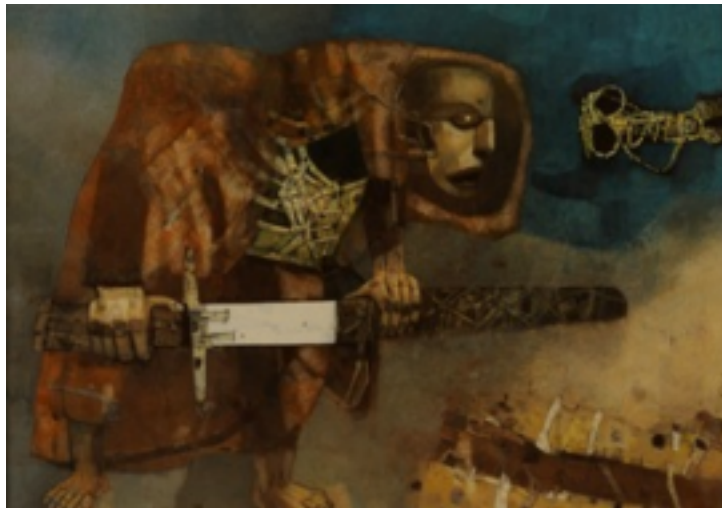


Art on the Line

Sona Datta



Ganesh Pyne, *The Assassin*, tempera on canvas, 1979

Collection of Jane Gowers & Kito de Boer

Calcutta 1946: While playing in Calcutta's back alleys a young Ganesh Pyne (1937-2012) stumbled upon a barrow piled high with dead bodies during the city's brutal sectarian violence that saw the slaughter of some eight thousand Hindus and Muslims over the space of a couple of weeks. Pyne's startling early encounter with death would provide the creative force behind the melancholy and magical realism of his mature work. "Assassin" powerfully captures the violence of those times. Hunched over in the shadowy half-light, the assassin wields a large machete and stalks across the canvas, intent, with a haunted look on his face. A headless woman floats in the upper right quadrant, at the bottom are scattered human remains. Melancholy hangs in the air.

2017 marks the 70th anniversary of the Independence and subsequent Partition of British India in 1947, an event with seismic consequences for the peoples of South Asia and, arguably, the world. The nations of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh were formed through India's violent rupture with itself. India's plurality had always been its strength, but for the first time in its 5000 years of recorded history, India found itself divided along religious lines. In the summer of 1947, more than ten million people were displaced and a million lost their lives scrambling to get onto the right side of a new border in the name of religion.

Most Partition narratives begin and end with India and few address the importance of visual culture in the imagination of new nations and selves. Tyeb Mehta was one of the very few artists whose work directly addressed his trauma as an Indian Muslim who chose not to leave India at Partition. However, many artists have used conduits to negotiate the personal and collective experiences of dislocation and relocation. Some are only beginning to grapple with Partition's residue, from grand nationalist storytelling to the most intimate aspects of the self as explored in the haunting work of Ganesh Pyne.

In the early twentieth century the Indian freedom movement had delivered a united image of Indian tradition enshrined in the works of artists such as Jamini Roy and Nandalal Bose and at the culture castle of the Tagores in Calcutta. But it also marginalised India's Muslims.



Chittoprasad Bhattacharya, 1940s, *Quit India*, woodcut

Collection of Jane Gowers & Kito de Boer

Chittoprasad Bhattacharya's (1915-1978) visual reportage used a new kind of social realism seen in his iconic print "Quit India", which shows a group of Indian children hurling stones at an oncoming British military tank. Bhattacharya saw both children and peasants as the common victims of colonial and capitalist exploitation and equally Tagore's pedagogic ideal at Santiniketan to be fundamentally disconnected from what was now happening to masses of people in the country at large.

By mid-century that hard won unity had become fatally compromised and was exploited by Imperial Britain during the hasty division of India in 1947. The story of India's independence is thus not complete without the story also of its division, the implications of which were both catastrophic and creative. The largest migration of people in human history changed

the face of cultural production in South Asia in surprising ways. But what was India's loss was also Pakistan, and later Bangladesh's, gain. The disruptive and creative responses to Cyril Radcliffe's controversial line shows that while Partition was clearly destructive, it was also fashioned new borders, identities and regimes.

A revolutionary art movement flourished in India following Independence, which was simultaneously local and global, Indian and international.



Husain, *Man* 1952, acrylic on board Peabody Essex Museum

MF Husain (1913-2011)'s *Man* sits like Rodin's *Thinker* in the centre of this work as both the artist and the citizen of newly independent India cast amid a bricolage of history. This enigmatic and chaotic assemblage is an expression of post-colonial life. His large green eye observes the bewildering swirl of opposing forces - ancient and modern, Eastern and Western, hopeful and anxious, powerful and vulnerable, chaotic and creative - that surrounded the artist-intellectual in post-Independence India.

The contemporary engagement with cultural geography across South Asia has continued to interrogate identity, conflict and belonging. Amar Kanwar's elegiac visual essay from 1997 *A Season Outside* is a sonorous work that plays off the deep anxiety around the world's longest militarized border that exists today between India and Pakistan.

West Pakistan would take on the role of the new colonial power over its smaller, poorer and distant cousin, East Pakistan – a relationship that became so degenerative it would eventually lead to East Pakistan's secession and the birth of Bangladesh in 1971.



Naeem Mohaiemen, *Kazi in Noman's Land*, 2008, British Museum

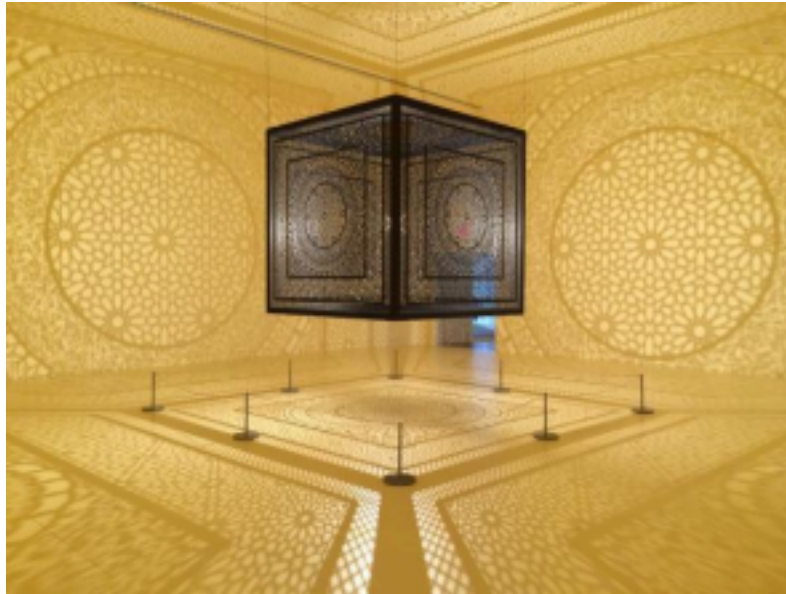
Image Courtesy of the Artist

Naeem Mohaiemen (b.1969) 's tiny sculpture made of postage stamps is a creative response to grandstanding official agendas. It deconstructs the grandiose narratives of Partition through a work that explores the commemoration of the same cultural and political hero by three nations. The Bengali poet, Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976) was first celebrated by India for his secular humanism. Pakistan then hailed him as a 'Muslim' poet in a bid to displace the 'Hindu' poet Tagore from the East Pakistani mindset and, after 1971, Bangladesh honoured him as their national poet.

Despite a constitution that paid tribute to religious diversity, Pakistan quickly came to define itself as an Islamic Republic and a state-sponsored Islamic agenda had far reaching implications for both national and international politics. Pakistan's official denial of a shared heritage with India plays out in *Arabian Delight* by Huma Mulji (b.1970). A taxidermy camel is forced into a battered old suitcase - a pointed reference to the wholesale import of an alien Arab culture into Pakistani society.



Huma Mulji, *Arabian Delight*, 2008, taxidermy camel in suitcase
Saatchi Gallery (Image Courtesy of the artist)



Anila Quayyum Agha, 2013, *Intersections*, laser cut steel

Peabody Essex Museum

Agha (b. 1965) uses beauty to transcend borders of race, religion, gender, and culture to create a totalizing space that embraces all. A single bulb activates a laser-cut box, casting patterned shadows that reference Islamic filigree across all corners of the gallery. Growing up in Pakistan, Agha described her childhood wonder at the beauty of Islamic sacred spaces but also how, as a girl, she was confined to worship at home. Many years later after arriving in America, she had felt welcomed as a woman but excluded as a Muslim. It was the desire to overcome the barriers and categories that crisscross all of our lives that provided the emotional motivation for this work. This is not a work about Islam but a meditation on the alienation created by boundaries and their arbitrary categorizations.

South Asia's shared cultural heritage has continuously resisted erasure despite the incredible burden placed upon it by its new borders. The experiences of political rupture, of belonging and suddenly not belonging and of the enduring human need to create in spite of political revision and truncation is universal.

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