

Shezad Dawood

dormant cultural histories, A PENCIL MOUSTACHE, Pakistani models, hoodies on bikes, ACID MOTHERS TEMPLE, Beat dropouts, Rothko, DISTRICT 9, a Dream Machine, bursts of colour

If something appears exotic, it's because of where you're standing. My exotic is someone else's everyday normality. And you can bet that the humdrum, familiar place you inhabit will be fascinating to some other somebody, somewhere. Exotic: foreign, from elsewhere. There's really no objective definition – it's always defined from a partial vantage point, and as long as you never come into contact or dialogue with the exotic thing, it remains, always, at a distance.

Here, elsewhere; real, imagined; self, other. This is the loose network of ideas provoked by the work of Shezad Dawood, an artist who, for the last decade, has sought to bear witness to the complicated, unstable, rapidly evolving, multipoint perspective of art in an era of globalised cultural, ethnic and political dislocation. The dynamic of artistic development is no longer one of isolated local 'scenes', one supplanting another in historical significance. Today it's a decentred map of localities, communicating with each other under the ubiquitous notion of 'the contemporary' – contemporary

art from Britain, from America, from China, from India, from the Middle East – contemporary art from *x*. And one of the effects of this new, global polity is for art to celebrate its cultural, national, ethnic locality, its *x*-ness, or else attempt to avoid it, to efface it and adopt a kind of transnational visual vocabulary. So what's an artist to do? And what are artworks to do? Be from somewhere, or from nowhere, or from everywhere at once?

A decade ago, when multiculturalist politics in Britain were still focused on domestic realities – before those were blown apart by the new world of post-9/11 and the economic rise of the East – Dawood might have been called a 'British Asian' artist. For Dawood, growing up in London, with Indian and Pakistani parents, simple definitions of cultural identity were hardly going to be an option. Nor could you ignore them, unless you wanted to be pigeonholed. So, satirising the predicament of cultural identity politics, Dawood's early works sought to short-circuit images of 'whiteness' and 'Asianness', looping the markers of British cultural history onto a nonwhite, post-Western present: a photomontage of Dawood posing as British fascist leader Oswald Mosley (*The Leader*, 2002), black tunic, pencil moustache, posed heroically against a backdrop of the Union flag; or a photomontage of a good-looking young Asian man, dressed in the 1960s suit-and-tie of English comedian Peter Sellers, doubling up Sellers's brown-faced incarnation of a guileless Indian film extra cast adrift into the hedonism of Hollywood in Blake Edward's *The Party* (1968) (*The Party*, 1999); or Dawood again, restaging the photoshoot scene in Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966), taking the role of David Hemmings's 'swinging London' fashion photographer, with the action transposed to modern-day Karachi, where Pakistani models dressed in contemporary Asian fashion pose for film stills for a remake that never comes about (*Make It Big*, 2002–3).

Navigating, digressing from and evading the mainstream account of cultural identity (and its preoccupation with what defines people in the present, rather than what they have been or might become) by reviving and reworking dormant cultural histories is the project that underpins Dawood's work. And in his newest filmworks and paintings, to be seen in his first major public exhibition tour in the UK, *Piercing Brightness*,

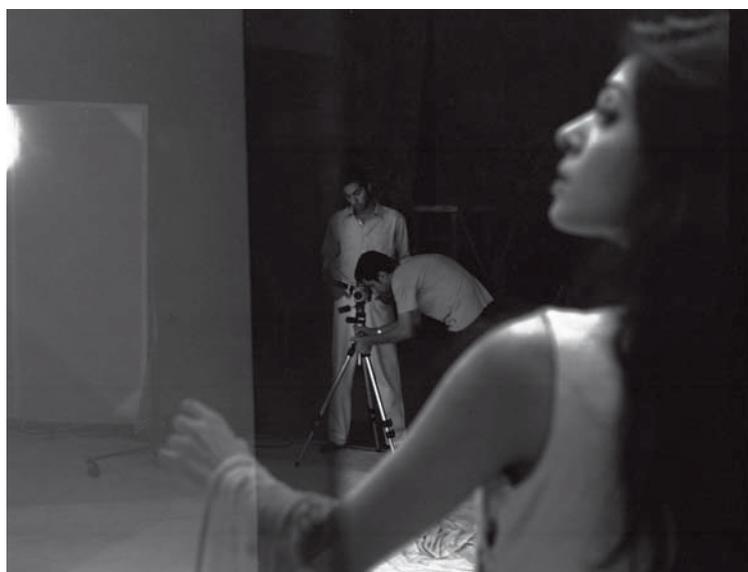
this page, both images:

Make It Big (Blow Up) (details), 2002–3, production still, b/w series of 7 silver gelatin prints, 41 x 51 cm. Courtesy the artist

facing page, both images:

New Dream Machine Project, 2011, film stills, super 16mm film transferred to HD (15 min loop). Courtesy the artist and Paradise Row, London

words J.J. CHARLESWORTH





Dawood sets himself the challenge of making this practice of dislocation ever more layered, multifarious and volatile.

Trailer (2011), a 15-minute edit of an as-yet-unfinished feature-length film, offers a fragmentary assemblage of scenes that suggests a sci-fi narrative. It's the story of a cadre of benign alien visitors sent, once upon a time, to earth to observe and assimilate undetected into human society: the narrative follows a group of their number who settled in the English city of Preston but are now attempting to make their homeward return. *Trailer* casts local people alongside conventional actors in the roles of the settled aliens – a Muslim shopkeeper, a middle-aged white woman, a young Chinese couple. There's also a gang of hoodies on bikes, always faceless, who may be aliens too, somehow related to the more benign assimilated visitors.

It's the barest of narrative bones, a well-worn staple of science fiction and sci-fi cinema; the motif of the alien visitor as a metaphor for cultural or ethnic difference punctuates cinematic history, from John Sayles's *The Brother from Another Planet* (1984) to Neill Blomkamp's *District 9* (2009). And yet, as narratives go, *Trailer* isn't simply reducible to the progress of its alien-human characters towards what seems to be a rendezvous point, *Close Encounters*-like, with a returning

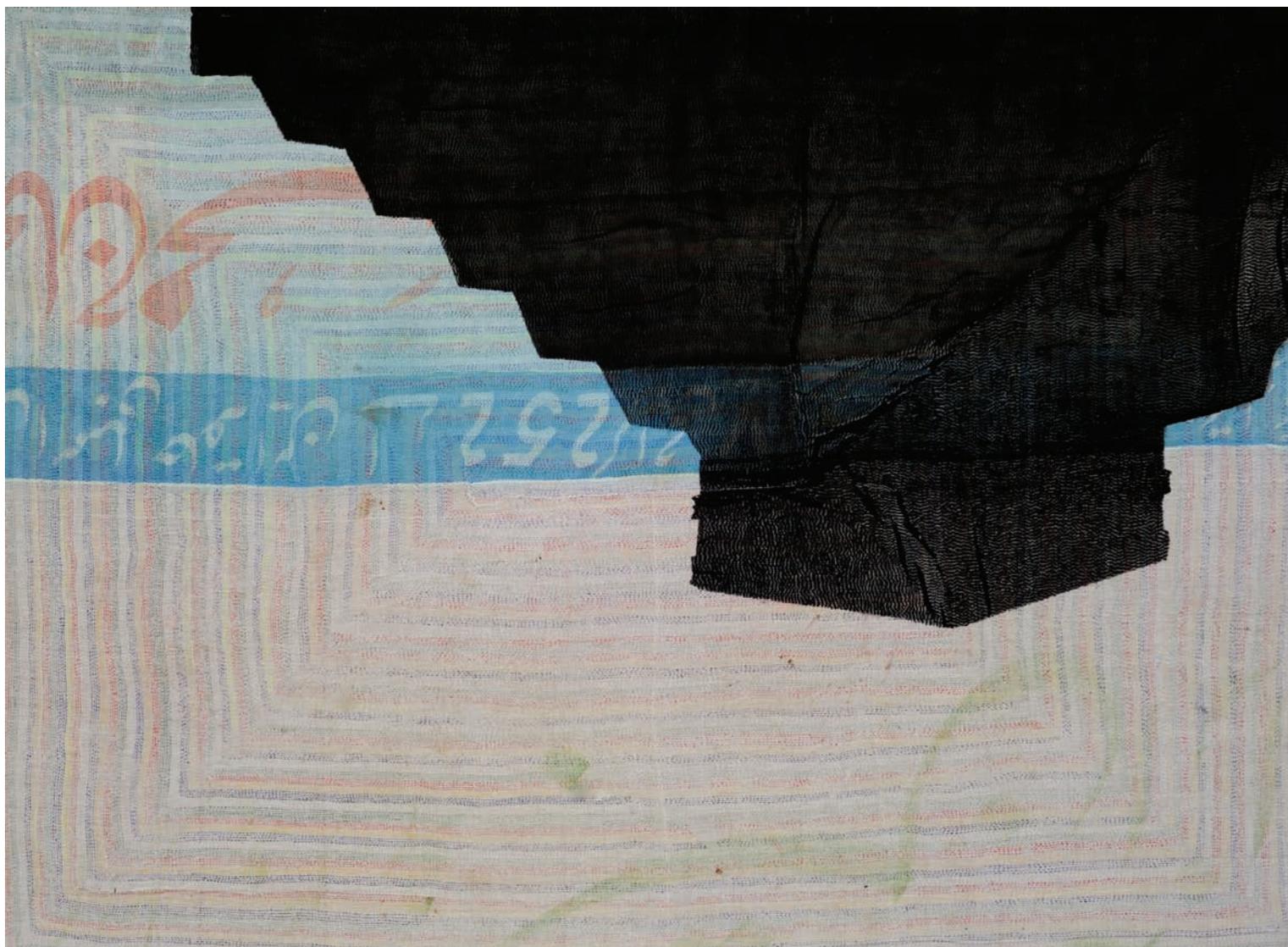
motherhood. Rather, as it remixes the urban, everyday world of Preston, it fractures the anticipatory style of the conventional film trailer with bursts of colour, flash-frames and drifting, out-of-focus lens effects, all set to the undulating, immersive music of Japanese psychedelic space-rockers Acid Mothers Temple.

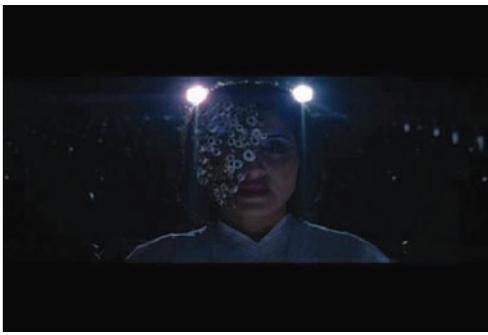
Dawood's use of film stock and analogue lens effects opens up a sense of historical depth within *Trailer* – the traces of film within the digital video. Historical depth appears here as a loss of visual depth; in the flattened, kaleidoscopic abstractions, lens flares and film scratching that haze and dissolve through the image. If the content of *Trailer* weaves together disparate themes of ethnicity and cultural displacement, the mesmeric visual effects and music give it a hallucinatory aspect that points towards the history of both modernist experimental film and psychedelia, and what these combined elements suggest is that an art of disidentification might correspond to a desire to step beyond the fixed determinations of culture and identity.

Dawood's other recent film, *New Dream Machine Project* (2011), addresses these problems head-on. In a sort-of documentary of a concert held in Tangier's Cinéma de Tanger, Moroccan ensemble the Master Musicians of Jajouka jam alongside the more outlandish guitar of contemporary blues guitarist Duke Garwood, while a scaled-up version of Beat artist Brion Gysin's Dream Machine revolves and illuminates the players and audience in the darkened auditorium.

It's a straightforward combination, but the film condenses past and present, East and West, art and spiritualism, to effectively reinvoke the cultural tensions at the heart of a historic Western

below:
Inverse Pyramid, 2010, acrylic
on vintage textile, 120 x 165 cm.
Courtesy the artist and Paradise
Row, London





avant-garde art's fascination with the exotic, spiritual, East. Gysin's *Dream Machine* is now a sort of legendary symbol for a countercultural fascination with transcendental experience and altered states of mind, while it was in Tangier that Gysin and other Beat dropouts such as William Burroughs saw an escape from the conformism of postwar America.

New Dream Machine Project has a strange tension at play in it. Initially one recognises the uncomfortable, old image of exoticism and a one-way cultural projection of extending from a hippie fascination with the mystic, spiritual Orient, while the *Dream Machine* produces the kind of psychedelic abstraction that reveals how much of modernity's conception of the abstract, from Mondrian to Rothko, touched on ideas of the spiritual rather than the rationalistic. Garwood's bearded face, under an unkempt mass of curly hair, would be just as much at home in the Tangier of 1968. And there's the occasional echo of ethnographic scrutiny in the camera's depiction of the Master Musicians, of the 'musical cultures of the Middle East' kind familiar in postwar, postcolonial travelogues.

So authentically does it appear to reproduce the trope of the exoticist, orientalist countercultural vision, and so convincing is its depiction of an event that looks like it should have happened 40 years ago, that it's a shock to see this film for what it is: a staged musical collaboration in which these

individuals and artistic histories are being purposefully engineered by an artist, now, in the early twenty-first century. Dawood's art deploys parallax as a critical tool, generating situations in which a subjective point of view is combined with the recognition of another, equally valid, alternative perspective, and in which the artist assumes a multiplicity of identities, adopting alternate roles to make this happen.

This 'trickster' form of manipulation has been noted before in discussions of Dawood's work. Here and in other works, the question of the artist's own 'belief' becomes unanswerable – Dawood's use of the iconography and thematics of Eastern religion and spirituality is consistently looped back through reference to Western Modernism's own appropriation of these. Yet it would be a mistake to see this as a form of fakery or imposture, as a kind of ironic citation. Instead it points to a latent, unresolved question in the old Western turn to the East for what it saw as the counter to its own rationalism – the dissolution of difference, and of identity fixed by the norm of the present order. Looking to a fantasy project of the East was just a way for those in the West to project what was really its own problem with transcending the here-and-now of modernity – which is why modernist abstraction is also the site for this longed-for escape from identity.

But in the contemporary context, in which the balance of powers has shifted away from the West, an 'escape from identity' takes on a different significance. If there's no more 'orientalist' gaze of the West looking down on its exotic other, then there's only a flat landscape of different cultures all observing and encountering each other. And if that's the case, then all cultural identities and perspectives become relative – so we can either privilege and pay respect to everyone's endless cultural difference, or we might look to some common ground that transcends these.

Dawood's work doesn't seek out some false resolution of this problem, but rather looks to construct a sort of meeting place where different cultural perspectives exist – visibly – simultaneously. Like his recent paintings, which deploy abstract motifs that intermingle Western geometric abstraction and the mystical geometries of Sufi Islam on patterned industrial textiles originally made in Pakistan in the 1970s, Dawood's films are platforms where multiple cultural perspectives and localities overlap and translate into each other. Rather than being windows onto the exotic, they're turntables, or hinges; places where cultural perspectives coexist without fusing, presenting to each other the multiple, contingent meanings of their shared resources.♣

Shezad Dawood: *Piercing Brightness is on view at Modern Art Oxford through 10 June and then, as part of the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad, at two sites in Penzance: Newlyn Art Gallery, from 24 June to 29 September; and the Exchange, 30 June to 15 September*

above, all images:
Piercing Brightness, production still, 2011. Photo: Bartolomiej Sienkiewicz. Courtesy UBIK Productions Ltd, London