

New Art Exchange, 39-41 Gregory Blvd, Nottingham NG7 6BE

## Shezad Dawood: Encroachments



Title : Shezad Dawood, Encroachments. Installation view, New Art Exchange, 2020

Website : <http://www.nae.org.uk/exhibition/encroachments/170>

Credit : Photo Reece Straw



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### Shezad Dawood: Encroachments

New Art Exchange

18 January - 15 March 2020

Review by Julia Schouten

Shezad Dawood's exhibition is overrun with multi-coloured terrazzo. The walls are plastered with garish speckles, which seep into paintings, prints, plinths and even the exhibition guide. The terrazzo, designed by Dawood, gives the display a Pop-y veneer, strengthened by visual allusions to Robert Rauschenberg's collages and Andy Warhol's silkscreens, as well as tributes to the arcade game, Space Invaders. While Pop art's history is typically limited to parochial Anglo-American narratives, here Dawood places it in dialogue with a range of Pakistani cultural and political sources, dating from the 1950s to the 1980s. These include references to the country's founder, Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the psychedelic rock band, The Panthers, and Dawood's personal experience of arcade gaming in Karachi.

This environment sets the scene for the show's main feature, a Virtual Reality (VR) work in which the viewer travels through time and spaces in Pakistan. The VR experience begins in Ferozsons in Lahore, a long-serving Urdu bookshop and publishing house founded in 1894. Participants can walk along the shelves, which are lined with a brightly coloured array of the artist's favourite Urdu book covers. Apparitions of a father and daughter lead the way into a secret passageway, which collapses to become an arcade game shop. The space is deserted, bar a recently lit cigarette smouldering in an ashtray that suggests another being is not far away. On approaching an arcade machine, a game of Space Invaders begins, requiring the participant to fire at advancing pixelated aliens. When the game ends, the setting changes to a proposed US Embassy building, designed by Richard Neutra, in Karachi. Roaming along the building's imaginary outskirts, the structure warps and changes colour as if a hallucination. The surroundings finally transform into a tea shop, wherein the proprietor walks around and through the viewer as they observe him pouring tea and listen to the lively traffic from the street outside. Then a distant crash or explosion brings the experience to a sharp close.

The journey through Dawood's Virtual Reality is comparable to Kurt Vonnegut's novel 'Slaughterhouse-Five' (1969), in which the protagonist Billy Pilgrim has become "unstuck in time", his story retold through flashbacks and time travel. In Dawood's world, participants similarly jump through time and space, guided through a meandering memory lane in which the settings have been subjectively reconstructed and rendered by the artist. Taking in the Pop vernacular that surrounds this VR work, together with the US Embassy building that features within it, 'Encroachments' feels like a sinister game of "spot the indoctrination." Dawood interrogates the conspicuous and insidious means by which the US has attempted – and continues to attempt – to assert its cultural and political power in Pakistan and elsewhere. By also staging actual, existing environments through a personal lens, for instance creating an archive of a historical bookstore stocked only with his favourite book covers, Dawood playfully and meticulously interweaves the notions of archives, history, memory, identity and power, all of which shape how we understand ourselves.

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