

THE PROMISE OF AN ARCHIVE

by Shaheen Merali

The history of renege responsibility:

The space in-between the vanishing points of the past and the wonder of the future to come can be described as being that of a state of suspension. It is neither grounded nor is it in flight, it is neither pure nor unclean but remains a constant in this hovering state, submissive to the elliptical tales of families and the migration of the earth's revolutions. This suspension is neither here nor was it fully ever there..... In what is construed as the 'here', what has been and can be of assistance for those who are yet to be born, is forged into memory, so its meaning can be learnt and held as tightly as a guiding path that disallows a repetition of the how-come and why-nots that haunt our anxious daily hours. We are, in that sense, the constant architects who want to get to 'there' where we should be and cultivate that which might come from there on. These shards from the past that provide a route marker for a future yet to come, are but a vision of an optimistic dawn, borne of the dying rays of a lengthened past which is shared as historical space; -a space within which a collective spirit that is built from the burns of hope and fright slowly cools. This fragile unfolding is marked by the pain that fills the growth which we have learned to call civilisation and which we assume to be the price of evolution. The whole is often marked by the symbolic that rises to the 'top', a detail that remains as a defining call of our collective selves. A hitherto relatedness that forever acts as a references of esteem and can often be found devolved as the monumental (carved into striated marble or polished bronze). These plinthed figures and text perform as the stony narratives of our greatest conquest and kinship. The sojourn of society's individuals, from conspicuous youth to fashioned grandees, is publicly framed by a paper trail and increasingly results in virtual stories albeit historically it remains uneven and full of breaches. Absent therein are the extremes of the wefts and tales of hunger or helplessness, of the cursed and indolence; herein the valiant and the courageous, the colonial visionaries and the knaves of wealth are celebrated. A universe withheld, marked by values and lives, where the languid ramble of the everyday is absent within. In trying to make coherence of the whole, we have lost so much of the minutiae and our aptitude remains in carrying the fleshy embers that make class, race and gender specific. These one-sided, embellished tales that smother reality reek of hierarchies and bias as they would appear to stand for the whole. A misfortune that drives the potential of the complete and of a future to be told and reformed is mired by prejudice. The sacrifice and the eclipsed victims of this phallocentrism remain the women and children form every corner of the globe. Even the familial and the ownership of land, a tryst that makes us all psychologically bound, enslaved as we have been by this strict identification, remains closeted in relationship to the fuller domain. Stories of birth and drive within the everyday are relinquished, chastened and furnished by the gendered flesh and the breath of class and caste. The portals of such a marred bias in identity politics has been, and remains, the guiding principles of most governance including states of democracy, fascism or communism; a set of agreed forces that was, is and will subjugate its subjects, its actions providing the privilege (or not) for the right to be accounted within the global soul; in such orchestration the majority of civil society provides the tracks for the vehicle that is constantly re-establishing the everyday as its economic and political domain. The plight remains in destabilising this embezzled reality, to toil and to make sense of its past as well as to forge a path for a future born of equality, built from the inspirational tales of all lives and multiple lived realities.

If we remain in this patriarchal unfolding of a national manhood based on tales of fright, of many doomed and much ado about nonsense, we become increasingly incited by the one and a thousand lies that fill our schools and screens, written into the books and the scripts that provide a programme of the lies of a past as a holy assent. We remain the passive passengers of an organized, de-rooted equanimous future which should not remain an approximation of Shangri-La. In acting and in re-writing away from this charade we will end by our acts of research that which had harassed and dismissed the real archive of the past and future to be born. This state of constant query, of archives from every memoir, a re-calibration of a faulted library, of unearthing passages that have remained hidden or even deliberately destroyed, of writhing the controls away from the sly and allowing witnesses to amend this mythology of gender, race and class to a place in which birth, life and death can evolve into our history; a history of I, you, us, we and them.

The gift of conviction:

Such overwhelming ruminations have been made into memorable epics, including the film classics *The Tin Drum* based on Gunther Grass' first novel and Mehboob Khan's directorial masterpiece *Mother India*; in both works intergenerational strife and suffering form the embattled background with further contestations in the form of struggles with the land. Individuals come to grips with the enormous task of reviewing contemporary history by recalling the disavowed and the forgotten as a way to make amends with the past and build their daily lives into a working reality for a feasible future. The meaningful way that works of fictions attest to human frailty is similar to the project of reinstatement that Daha resolves. Using oral testaments and photographs as her main source, these documents of cultural value and memory assist her to investigate the possibilities of a past yet to face any closure, a form of a tautological backbone for many writers, artists and philosophers in the past. Her nuanced treatment of melding personal history into the ways of time and terrain, like theirs, respectfully or creatively helps to provide an active itinerary of thoughts and ideas. Herein inflections in their field of knowledge or assumptive thinking can provide witnesses and provoke assumption in such a project where it is difficult to prove a moral, political or historical influence on subjectivity, wherein aesthetic experience can become more significant. In a similar way the recent revising of twentieth century Iranian history by Marjane Satrapi in her graphic novel, *Persepolis*, has provided a generation of Iranian post-revolutionary youth with knowledge of a trace of the contemporary Islamic republic of Iran and their place in the world as diasporic second or third generation Europeans or North Americans. The recent work of Ramesch Daha, 32° 00' N, 53° 00' E is set within the familial universe of life in Iran, between the time of the Shah and his gradual removal by the fastidious Islamic revolution in 1979 and the creation of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Daha, a trained painter and a keen researcher, has used her exacting skills to compose and enhance an apt subject at this particular time, where again this cradle of civilisation and one of the most strategic placed countries of the Near East is under a further political surge and re-evaluation both from within its own boundaries and within in the global arena. Daha has been periodically drawn to mediatic events, submerging herself in working in series that require as much as two years to complete, habitually after an initial phase of intense research. Her series draw on issues of weighty contemporaneity taken from the media, which in the past may have had a great amount of journalistic coverage. Her 9-11 series is an ongoing project, so far consisting of 741 portraits of some the victims from this most injurious of attacks on American soil, whilst the No Comment series bearing a title taken from the solemn daily footage of a news item that is featured on Euronews, likewise examines daily events around the world.

Both these series were conceived as history projects, a mapping of geopolitical movements that have shaken the daily realities and whose effects still reverberate. Daha's keen interest in media is evident in the sheer depth and volume of her research, which remains within and around the work like a shroud or a mist, enveloping both its development and the final conceptual framing of the project. For the 9-11 series, the actualised painted portraits of the victims were never hung in the gallery; they remained stacked in singular files, a comment on the actual length of the administration of 'State' casualties. These portraits, each executed with precise details of the individuals' features and personalities were only part of the conceptual framing, which sited their presence. The audience is allowed to intervene and make visible the portraits by handling them like forensic evidence, a task that many were afraid to undertake. This totalising scenario within an exhibition, committed as it was to unearthing and giving back to the world a comprehensive meta-portrait of the whole and not just multitudes as fragments, was a serious undertaking on the part of the artist.

There is an aspect in Daha's practice, which remains at a deliberately slow pace; an even demonstration of a refusal to perform at the hectic pace of search engines, from whence a number of her research facts do actually emerge. In 9/11 she re-considers her vantage point on the moral outrage of the attack on the World Trade Centre, deliberates as she has with the current project, 32° 00' N, 53° 00' E, maintaining a rigorous attitude on what she terms "the business of finding", which she claims is a "personal" matter of confluences of narratives. Does she find her own 9-11? Or is she right to point out that we all have or understand our own version of a global event like 9-11. Either way, her previous works have allowed Daha to demonstrate the speculative nature from which she starts to use documentation as a hard shoulder on the motorway of life's past, present and a measured approach to a future still in credit - or is it debit?

In the recent work, 32° 00' N, 53° 00' E, (which are the ordinance coordinates for Iran), Daha takes documentation as the starting and the entry point to all her responses, realised as notations. She concludes her imagemaking with tough but gentle pronouncements, all branded by the continuous fascination that documents hold in her reestimation of memory and national narratives, these are further underpinned by oral collections that she has recorded within her own family. The fragility of personal histories and pain are interweaved in these paintings, drawings and video documentation that Daha surreptitiously arranges to make her 32° 00' N, 53° 00' E, her Iran.

The promise of an archive for Daha starts as a set of private photographs and an interview that Daha undertook with her recently deceased grandmother in Vancouver. The archive blossoms under her careful propagation and starts to reveal a whole secret red line of bureaucracy that starts to rumble within the assassins' reign at the time of the Shah of Iran and the final crumbling edifice of a state, rotting both within and from the outside- a very similar scenario to the more recent events of the faulted and faulty results of the general elections in 2009.

Daha has always maintained that, although she chooses to use personal material from the memoirs and albums of her family, the narrative is "not her own story..." she accentuates "this is not judgmental but a showing of history". Many questions can be asked of these presumptions; whose histories? When in history and why is it important to dwell on such a traumatic period at this particular time?

Daha has suggested that she has " a compulsion to find", which she does by looking at other archives and as to how they are organised, how are they made accessible and what are their relevance to this moment. A fine example for her research has been held at the Deichtorhallen, Hamburg. She suggests that archives can allow us "to speak meaningfully" of our coordinates, of the longitudes and latitudes of our mind, of souls constantly searching, of homes in limbo and of phantom lands. Filed by geometries, guided by geographies, we try to be attentive to our place as we traverse the earth. An earth that no longer obeys by rules of borders and settlements, a cartographer's nightmare and, even with the advent of technologies including Global Positioning Systems, the only thing we know is where we are physically but never recognise how we have evolved around significant social and political changes and in active dialogue with an active lack of belonging as guiding thoughts to our realities.

32° 00' N, 53° 00' E

Anywhere in Iran is 32° 00' N, 53° 00' E, its generic coordinate according to forlorn cartographers and astronomers of Iran and its previous reincarnation, Persia, which were both well traversed by these professions. Drawn and quartered by empires and a haven for philosophical debate, the land of Iran, is fused with striking thoughts and basks in stark resources. Iran remains one of the most enriched countries in the world, from its long cultural history and its quantifiable sub-terrain amounts of black gold and gas; a mimetic environment within which multiple visions have evolved and, more recently, where Islamic mysticism has been tinged with the state's refineries. It is a complex whole, affecting its citizens hybrid rights as it perpetually swings between revolutionary foliation and a messianic grasp.

Daha, started her research with the stock and cast of its resources, the plantations of pipelines and the blustery diaphragms (the oil fields) that makes the world move - all the geological wealth and the Google Earth blemishes of tarnished deserts and scarred rural peripheries, its nuclear gambit and the cat and mouse of what and where's? This is the stuff of memory; of a landscape.

From these rudimentary, powerful elements she paints generic landscapes of 'an' Iran of 32° 00' N, 53° 00' E, a sentient Caspar David Friedrich landscape, still holy, still pure and still. These four large paintings are the result of her obsession with the landscape. Landscapes that do not lie but do not necessarily speak the truth either, the pipelines that cross them remain hidden as the grand forms supercede human endeavours which have carved into its flesh. These muted colour landscapes, painted with a reduced palette, allow for a safe place to emerge, a place of innocence rather than history. It is in the paintings relationship to the works on paper, 150 odd drawings made from the photographic residues of her grandmother's albums, that she places the trace of horror and assassinations in context.

The drawings, in slight pencilled lines and mainly monochromatic with plain white backgrounds, start to untangle a much darker landscape at play, one of counter strategies and men in black suits scouring and ploughing demonic seeds of hate and difference in the existing system. The many drawings help to build a more urban picture of Iran, mainly of Tehran, its crux and bane of fleeting change and deathly policing and politics.

All the clandestine elements which could and have remained remote as readings are surprisingly entrenched in these drawings and they allow, alongside a explicit interview with her grandmother, a mediation between the effects and affects of the evolving revolution; its personalities, its motives and the flesh start to writhe in the memory of the scapes. This huge amount of research into her family's role and part in the last century in Iran, treating information as a mapping on the front and back of photographs and formalising all the results into an aesthetic enquiry to recall an impossible narrative, now, is a major undertaking. The whole starts to work like a novel in multiple parts, fielding the unfolding narrative.

The paintings, the drawings and the filmed interview all start the process of the translation of one prolonged exit and one country's transcendence into the polar politics of revolution. This is the subterrain and the belly of the beast, of veiling and unveiling, of Reza Shah and the Pahlavi destiny, of Khomeini and Khomeini, of new schools and odd internationalism, of gendered spaces and streets names being altered, of history that has been made and histories that will come. All this, plus Roosevelt, Stalin and Churchill in Tehran in 1944 striking a new deal between Russia and United States, in a land that provided the patent for the Islamic Republic.....

In speaking about this whole, of two thousand hates and two thousands wrongs, of bedlam and bellum, Daha makes the synaptic twisted a compulsive viewing; in posing different contexts in a gradient hole of private archives that absurdly blots even further Iran's reality than the current supreme council's hesitance, we are left in this creation, an installation with a stupendous understanding of competitive turmoil and a speculative relationship of the real 32° 00' N, 53° 00' E.

Daha allows us to enter into the ownership of these memos, memories and memoirs; we feel deluded by the here and the there, in the naked shame and delirious delusion of the past. It starts to feel like we are involved in a ridiculously, transgressive contemporary reading, which assists in fetching and making new meaning, a deeper overstanding.

It is after all, a frail old woman who passed away a short while ago with epic recollections of her status as twice exiled and we can only continue to be her audience in the transformations that affected her life and our birth. This is the intention of this visual experiment.