

## Luggage, People and a little space

### Introductory Note

and you became, like memory,  
necessary. *Dast-e-Saba*,  
I said to myself. And quietly

the wind opened its palms: I read there of the night:  
the secrets of lovers, the secrets of prisons.

– Agha Shahid Ali, Homage to Faiz Ahmed Faiz (d. 20 November 1984)

Among the many things encountered in Aban Raza’s paintings and prints, there are axioms for this fragile moment in history. Much like the seams of the titular luggage, an implosion is imminent; objects of daily life strewn on tables and shelves signal a tender rootedness, as if waiting to be packed and moved elsewhere. The air is potent, nestled precariously between entangled limbs on buses and in quiet shafts of light; the air is heavy between the eyes of women and the walls of their homes; the air is limp as decay encroaches on wilting flowers—red roses to be precise, a symbol as much as an idea for the close of an era in modern Indian history.

The works selected for *Luggage, People and a little space* are containers of *movements*, gestures toward departure and arrival, and the time that is spent between. An invisible distance is inscribed in each work as it treads a cartography of its own. In ‘Tamia, Madhya Pradesh’ Raza painted a journey in a public bus for which she waited, along with others, for many hours. A packed bus arrived, with bodies and bags dangling from each possible outlet. Shelves and seats meld as the body takes the shape of that which is unoccupied. In these journeys and their remnants, the “public” is never far or deserted—as bodies abound from canvases to prints, it is a reminder that as we seclude and withdraw from shared spaces, many continue to inhabit what Raza calls a “tight reality”. This “tightness” leads to bold strokes and fluid lines, figurations that convey the bodily discomfort of those on this journey—denying us the solace of conjuring nostalgic visions about the crumbling state of public utilities, and confronting us with difficult questions that will stay: What happens to the people who rely on these? What happens to welfare?

These questions pervade the densely coloured scenes, as assertive strokes capture physical markers of labour on the body. Two paintings depict women in Mewat, a nomadic community comprising Dalits and Muslims, who have gathered to discuss their right to vote. Raza was struck by how much of economic and domestic labour is performed by women; in one painting a group of women stand, many with hands on their hips; in another three women stand in the foreground, beyond their house lies the landscape they nourish with their hands. In the bare walls of their homes, one thinks of subsistence and how invisible female labour and their

contribution to production still is, so that even the use of the word “farmer” to describe their occupation requires “woman” as a prefix.

If the public is the site for thinking of collectivity, it is also a space for quotidian absurdities. In ‘Delhi Bus’, sharp lines circle the eyes of wedding band members, who board a bus. They are headed to a celebration, but their eyes evoke the exhaustion of working long nights; a co-passenger looks on unhappily as instruments and bodies take up space. The bright orange of their uniforms sits in vivid juxtaposition to the blue seats of the low-floor buses that the city introduced ahead of its “beautification” in 2010. The details of the faces in these oil paintings are a time-stamp of sorts; Raza only paints the faces of people she has shared durations with. The group of women in Mewat, for instance, were only met with for a brief time, not enough to permit a “knowability”. The sharing of time with strangers without the exchange of words is an experience that vanishes when publics evaporate. And with it, we lose the chance to observe, understand and respect difference.

In beginning this note with a poem on Faiz written at the time of his death by Agha Shahid Ali, there was an intent to evoke passing and passage as a form of movement. In the lithographs and serigraphs featured here are scenes from a life—tinctures and TV remotes share space on tables and shelves, an artefact from Mohenjodaro rests before a television. The technique is one of distortion and sharp geometries, and it is curious to think of what Walter Benjamin describes as the “form things assume in oblivion”.<sup>1</sup> Benjamin is writing here of Odradek, a creature which defies a singular comprehension in a short story by Kafka titled *The Cares of a Family Man*. Odradek, much like these objects “has a lingering presence in his home, often not seen but his presence is noticeable”.<sup>2</sup>

These prints were made in Garhi, a community space for artists established in 1976 by Lalit Kala Akademi. The institution has one common room for printmakers, and the prints shown here have been produced in the company of other artists—it’s interesting to think about the implications of such shared spaces for artistic and community well-being. Raza received a grant from Lalit Kala Akademi in 2013 - 2014 and has been visiting Garhi ever since.

In these serigraphs and lithographs—techniques of dense mediations—corners of a home that once was are witness to the eclipse of diversity in thought and being in our public life. Here, it is also interesting to think of the portrait of Romila Thapar adjacent to her study, where objects speak to and of a life that is drenched with the public. In these works a shelf filled with books, table runners and chairs hold markers of civilisational confluences, of the many that is slowly being consumed into one, posing urgent questions: Where can we search for and locate resistance to tyranny today? How does the “private” reflect the public? The Palestinian flag connects each print, asserting a simple truth: “Social protest never disappears; instead, it moves in cycles between “manifest” and “latent” (i.e., more and less visible phases).”<sup>3</sup>

Tracing many landscapes and surfaces, a city and a home, these works extend an invitation to partake in dwelling in the public, not as an act of segmented repose and disaffected study but

as moments of immediacy, of contact and connect, as tinted screens of devices flatten the many “tight” realities of the world.

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Franz Kafka: On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death”, in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections* trans. Harry Zohn, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1968).

<sup>2</sup> Franz Kafka, “The Cares of a Family Man”, in *The Complete Stories*, trans. Willa Muir and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken Books, 1995).

<sup>3</sup> Olivier Marchart, *Conflictual Aesthetics: Artistic Activism and the Public Sphere* (Sternberg Press, 2019).

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