

This essay accompanies the exhibition *The Boy Who Got Tired of Posing* by Bani Abidi
Co-presented by Gallery TPW and the South Asian Visual Arts Centre (SAVAC)
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Gallery TPW gallerytpw.ca

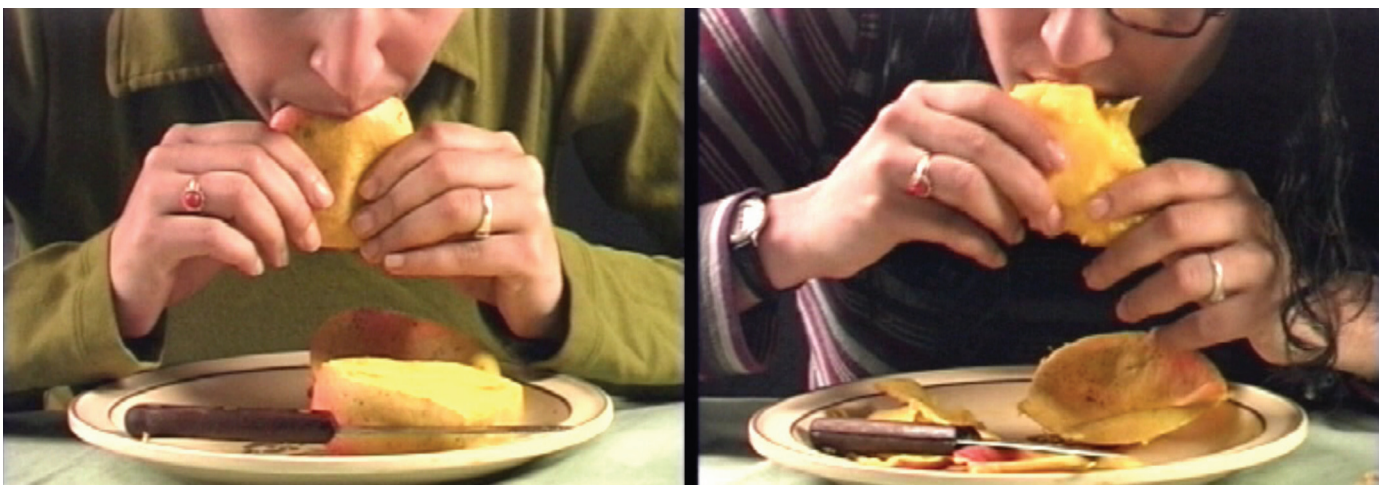
The Precarity of Truth

By Pablo de Ocampo

In an increasingly globalized world—with Internet news, cell phones, blogs and the like—it's often all too easy to get lulled into a presumptive understanding of all that goes on internationally. I read *The New York Times* and *Harper's*, I listen to the BBC, and I am a frequent reader of aljazeera.net. The truth of the matter is that I don't actually know much beyond headlines or news blips; through a detailed study of any situation with sources such as these, all the stories, reports and silent spaces that result from an absence of coverage add up to entirely different "truths". Beyond that (and what is being reinforced for me on a daily basis since my recent move to Canada), our cultural upbringings and associations can often further confuse our understanding of these situations.

Over the past several years, Lahore-based artist Bani Abidi has built a body of work that skillfully engages these very issues: the inconsistent truths within news media and official histories and the

complexities of understanding national identity across cultures and borders. Generally asking these questions around Pakistan, she also looks at the ways in which political and cultural relationships with India, the US, and others relate back to her country. Working primarily in video, Abidi often makes use of song, humour, and performance as a way to approach her subjects. In a trio of early videos, Abidi casts herself as the performer in three different scenarios that comment on the tumultuous and problematic relationship between Pakistan and India. She plays both an Indian and Pakistani arguing about which country has the better selection of fruit in *Mangoes* (2000), depicts a pair of young women dancing to Indian and Pakistani pop song and drowning out each other's music in *Anthem* (2001), and offers a split-screen news broadcast on both sides of the border telling two sides of the same banal story in *The News* (2001). This marriage of song, performance, and humour is perhaps best demonstrated in the video installation *Shan Pipe Band Learns the Star*



Bani Abidi, video stills from *Mangoes*, 2002.

Spangled Banner (2004)—a video that moves away from the dichotomy of Pakistani and Indian culture, and towards the translation and transmission of ideas across borders and cultures.

On a trip to Beirut a couple of years ago, I got horrendously ill from street foods and spent a few days in my dingy hotel room completely knocked out. As one is wont to do when stranded in a hotel in a foreign and strange city, I resorted to exploring the options on the somewhat-functioning satellite TV. Amidst the various broadcasts—ones from across the Arab world, and some goodies from East Asia—I stumbled across a string of French language channels, one of which was playing the wildly popular American show *24* (for the uninitiated: it's a spectacularly racist and conservative embodiment of American foreign policy and counter-terrorism in the post-9/11 era). As if the irony of watching this show in a hotel room in the city that gave car bombing its name (a mere two blocks from the crater left by the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in February of 2005) wasn't enough, Keifer Sutherland's voice had been dubbed over in French, whilst Arabic subtitles scrolled across the bottom of the screen.

The absurdity of these many layers of translation, and the dialogues that result from exporting and importing culture across borders, are at the center of Abidi's video *Shan Pipe Band Learns the Star Spangled Banner*. Scottish pipe bands are not an uncommon sight in Pakistan: a vestige from the British colonial era, they were historically found in the pomp and circumstance of military parades and such, though these days they are frequently found playing Indian music at weddings. Rather than

taping them playing from their usual oeuvre, Abidi commissions them to learn the US national anthem. We witness the whole cycle: from the group sitting around a boom box and listening to a scratchy tape of the familiar original, to the clumsy moments of trying to learn a new song, to the final rendition replete with the discordant tone of bag pipes.

On the surface, there is something humorous and quite simple, but below that unfurls a multi-layered dialogue around issues of imperialism and globalization. In choosing *The Star Spangled Banner* as the song, Abidi makes a direct comment on recent US foreign policy and the *National Security Strategy of the United States* that is based on the concept of parachuting into a country and prescribing a political and moral ideology by which to live. With much the same effect as Abidi's attempts to teach these musicians a song they are not familiar with, when policies and political systems are introduced onto a people, the end result is not necessarily the expected result.

Certainly there is a parallel being drawn between the US and British empires; within this historical connection is an element which points to the people's transformation of colonial influences over time. The classic ethnographic film *Trobriand Cricket* (Jerry W. Leach, 1976) documents a game of cricket played by the Trobriand Islanders in Papua New Guinea. Though the game seen in the film resembles what we know as cricket (bowlers, wickets, and bats), the Trobrianders have rewritten the game to integrate with their existing customs: more than 60 players from two villages chanting, dancing, casting war spells, and showing off sexually suggestive moves for the



Bani Abidi, video stills from *The News*, 2001

women spectators. While I don't think that these elements in *Trobriand Cricket* and *Shan Pipe Band* absolve—or in any way make up for—the legacies of colonialism, I think they point towards some element of humour and hopefulness in the resolve of the local to persevere despite outside influences over time.

When looking at Bani Abidi's *The Boy Who Got Tired of Posing*, part of what initially struck me was the way this narrative engaged me in spite of my complete unfamiliarity with the subject. Composed of three fictional photo and video components—*The Ghost of Mohammad Bin Qasim*, *The Boy Who Got Tired of Posing*, and *This Video is a Re-enactment*—the piece focuses on the historical figure Mohammad Bin Qasim, an 8th-century Arab general who led the conquests of the Sind and Punjab regions, bringing Islam to what would become the modern state of Pakistan. *The Ghost of Mohammad Bin Qasim* presents a series of eight black-and-white photographs of Yusuf Khan, a young muslim convert who embarks on a Quixotic journey around the country posing as Bin Qasim. *The Boy Who Got Tired of Posing* is a grouping of three portrait studio photographs of young boys dressing up as the legendary figure. Finally, *This Video is a Re-enactment* loops a segment of a made-for-TV movie broadcast in 1993 about Bin Qasim's conquests. While this subject is a rich and complex one, it is Abidi's overall analysis of how we understand history that serves as the work's most accessible entry point.

Abidi's recent project engages dialogues between contemporary visual art and documentary film/video practices, questioning the ability of records (moving

and still photographic images) to convey truth, or to accurately represent history. In this way, it is similar to Walid Raad's work created as The Atlas Group. The subject of Raad's work is the Lebanese civil wars that occurred between 1975 to 1991. Though Raad's subject is certainly more familiar to a North American audience (via the US intervention as a more recent event in our collective memory), it is nonetheless a complicated history to understand. A central element of Raad's conceptual approach is the difficulty, or even impossibility, of understanding the fractured state of a country torn apart by war and violence. Much of the output of The Atlas Group has existed within a visual art context (it is exhibited in galleries and museums), but these issues that Raad works around are directly drawn from theories rooted in documentary cinema. In much the same way, Abidi's project is built on the transposing of ideas from documentary practice into the space of the gallery.

Abidi uses these strategies to look not just at the complications of recording history, but also at how those complications can be exploited for the construction and furtherance of a particular vision of history and national identity. I think a parallel can be drawn to the story of Christopher Columbus' arrival in the United States: he is a somewhat mythologized figure whose conquest of a new territory ushered in a major religious and cultural shift and essentially erased the existing cultures that had lived on the continent for centuries -- they were erased both from our understanding of history and, literally, through the genocide of the population. Abidi is criticizing the ways in which Bin Qasim's history has been exploited and twisted to advance a specific Islamic history in the region;



Bani Abidi, video stills from *Shan Pipe Band Learns the Star Spangled Banner*, 2004

this is of course the same way that the teaching of American History heroicizes Columbus (or, for that matter Magellan, French fur traders, the cowboys and homesteaders of the American West, and so on) and positions him in a way that favors a Christian-European vision of events.

In each segment of this work, Abidi casts the subject within the context of a true narrative: from the story of the young Yusuf Khan, to the portrait studio images of the boys posing as Bin Qasim, to the TV documentary which, inexplicably, “appeared to run in extreme slow motion during the broadcast”. It is through the precarity of the truth present in each of these components that we glean the complexities and inconsistencies in this story. Just like the official history of Pakistan in textbooks, Abidi’s collection of documents shapes reality to serve her own purposes: an appropriated clip from a historical documentary suggests the fictitious nature of the story, Yusuf Khan’s pilgrimage helps to accentuate the mythological status that Bin Qasim has evolved into, and the banal photographs of children in headdresses point towards the ongoing indoctrination of Bin Qasim’s legacy through education and the official writing of history. In the same way, *The Boy Who Got Tired of Posing* not only comments on the re-imagining of Pakistani history through the lens of Islam, it casts a light on the heroicized histories of conquistadors, explorers, and other such figures throughout the world.



Bani Abidi, video still from *This Video is a Re-enactment*, 2005



Bani Abidi, detail of *The Ghost of Mohammad Bin Qasim*, digital print, 2005

About the Artist

Bani Abidi has been working primarily in video for the past seven years. These works investigate notions of cultural identity and history in her native Pakistan as well as within a global context. Abidi has exhibited extensively at galleries, festivals and museums internationally including ZKM (Karlsruhe), Thomas Erban Gallery (New York), National Gallery of Victoria (Melbourne), Fondazione Sandretto Re Rebaudengo (Turin) and has participated in the Singapore Biennale and the 3rd Fukuoka Asian Art Triennial. www.baniabidi.com

About the Writer

Pablo de Ocampo is a curator and occasional artist living in Toronto where he is the Artistic Director of the Images Festival. He recently relocated to Toronto from Portland, Oregon where he was a co-founder of the experimental film series Cinema Project and was the Executive Director of the Independent Publishing Resource Center.

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